

zero

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/32472301) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/32472301>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Video Blogging RPF
Relationship:	Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)
Character:	Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF), GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Non-Traditional Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Omega/Omega, Explicit Sexual Content, Fluff, Angst, Omega GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF), Omega Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF), Anal Sex, Oral Sex, Accidental Voyeurism, Rimming, Coming of Age, Friends to Lovers, Pining, Metaphorical Homophobia, Feelings Realization, Sexuality Crisis, Alcohol, Implied/Referenced Suicide, Happy Ending, Don't worry, Mating Cycles/In Heat, accidental heat, george has a tongue piercing for unfamily friendly reasons
Language:	English
Collections:	Omentalverse Fic Exchange 21
Stats:	Published: 2021-08-01 Completed: 2021-09-16 Chapters: 4/4 Words: 63235

zero

by [saintaches](#)

Summary

Dream isn't sure when George became so fucking pretty, but he's certain he can't fall in love with him.

They're both omegas, after all.

Notes

- dream is aged up a year
- if ur unsure about any of the tags u can ask me about them in the comments/twitter/tumblr/cc and i'll try my best to help out :))

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

blue push-button phone

Dream is very familiar with the stairs in his house.

He thinks he probably knows them better than anyone, even though his parents have lived here exactly the same amount of time as him—they moved to England when he was already walking around on two feet and reading entire books in a day, after all. But Dream has grown up in this house, and he’s the one who’s spent the most time pressing sooted feet against all the floorboards with his face screwed up in the hopes they won’t betray his location at three in the morning. So he knows the stairs the most.

He knows which stairs creak. He knows there are thirteen of them, and he knows the ninth has a dent in it that’s always been there. He knows how much it hurts to slide down them in a washing basket and crack his head open on the plant pot sitting at the bottom when the basket grows a mind of its own and decides it’s not meant for holding rowdy children. It’s meant for holding *washing*.

Of course, he’s talking about how well he knows the stairs, and it’s all *true*. Dream just isn’t really talking about stairs at all, because he’s talking about George.

He’s usually talking about George.

Dream knows George like he knows his stairs. He knows where every scar on his body is, just like he knows which stair isn’t as perfect as the rest, and he knows exactly what buttons to push to make George see in shades of red, even if it takes him ages and ages to get there. And he knows how George smells when he panics, because he’d been the one to dial nine nine nine on the landline when Dream cracked his head open on the plant pot. Storms over calm waters, the bite of salt clinging to shipwrecks washed up on the beach.

George’s scent was always sort of nautical. When Dream presented, he wasn’t all that surprised he ended up smelling so strongly of cliffside heather and brine, since nothing had an influence upon his life quite like George did.

Nothing could dissuade Dream from believing he knew George the best, not even when George left for university without him because he was a year ahead in school. *I’ll be home for Christmas*, he’d said, with a smile that Dream had seen thousands of times before. Then he was climbing into the back of a car, a paperback in one hand and the blue pillow from his bed in the other.

Except George didn’t come home for Christmas.

He didn’t come home for Easter or summer, either.

Dream celebrated his 18th birthday alone, the phone sitting in the centre of his bed as if it would make the thing come to life. When it eventually did, George sounded as if he had better, faster places to be. It was seven in the evening and Dream could hear the automated phone box voice instructing him to insert more pennies.

And Dream started to suspect George changed in a way stairs never could, like all those times he’d miscounted how many there were and ended up face planting right onto the landing. It wasn’t a good feeling. It was the sort of feeling which made his heart jump into his throat, his stomach drop, and his nose smart with white hot pain.

Dream has to dust himself off quickly, because George’s grandmother died last Thursday, and it’s the beginning of summer, and he’s coming home for the funeral, and they’re going to see each

other for the first time since George ran away to the city. And he shouldn't be so nervous about it. He knows George better than anyone in the whole world, better than his own mother. George can't have changed so much Dream no longer recognises him.

He *can't*, because Dream doesn't know what he'll do if he has.

The worst part about it is that Dream doesn't even find out from George himself.

"He hasn't told you?" his mom says when he gives her a blank stare. A practised glance at the microwave reveals it's seven fifteen. They're sitting on either side of the table, and although they have to lean past the crowd of wilting sea asters deposited in the middle of it to talk to each other, neither of them bother to move the vase. Breakfast doesn't usually foster easy conversation. Dream is far more used to sitting here with toasted bread shoved between his teeth, grateful for the flowers obscuring him from maternal eyes.

He relies on it now. The thorns pressing against his throat are a little tricky to swallow past, so his voice comes out lumpy with honey oats.

"No, he hasn't said anything." The phone on Dream's bedside is almost always silent, round buttons staring up at him with dark pupil numbers. He thought it might've sprung to life if George was coming *home*, boarding a train from the middle of the city all the way back to the coast through wire-fenced fields and pocket-sized towns. All the way to the station at the edge of the village, tiny enough it's only visited twice a day. Evidently not. "How do you know?"

"I saw his mom yesterday."

"Oh."

His fingernails rasp over the tablecloth, over faded fabric and fraying embroidery. George's family gave it to them one hazy Christmas, he remembers. It makes him set his palm flat against it, chipped beading suddenly aggravating rather than tactile. He's being watched from underneath a quirked eyebrow, and he knows she's only gauging his reaction because she knows how much George means to him, but it's disconcerting nevertheless. As if the distance between them is a glass viewing window. Dream can't stand it.

"I'm done," he says suddenly, pushing his chair back with his legs. His fingers curl around blue tableware until his place is vacant once more and there's no evidence he'd been sitting there in the first place. The crusts on his plate look like evaded conversations.

"He's coming back on the weekend. And the funeral is next week. We're going."

"Cool." It's not cool at all. He just can't think of anything better to say when his head is already running off in one direction and his heart is running in the other.

Dream tallies up the days when dish soap is dripping over his hands, and realises he has eighty-something hours until the light in George's bedroom flicks back on for the first time in nearly two years. Dependent upon what time he arrives. He itches to know so he can tick down the minutes in his head, mark the passing of each one with the clouds as they pulse in the wind.

He's still thinking about it in seven hundred and forty six seconds, with shower suds trailing down his back instead of washing up liquid. As he's pushing brittle fingers through his hair to rinse it out. Of course he knows George will have changed when he sees him again, but the degree of difference has shadowy question marks floating around it. Perhaps he won't even recognise George when he shows up outside his house. Perhaps George won't have time for him, bored by his small town mannerisms and familiar face.

In a moment of clarity, Dream realises he may be terrified.

When he pulls worn clothes over damp skin he forces himself to stop counting lest it drive him completely mad. Nervous electricity buzzes right beneath his skin as tattoo ink might, branding him with all the markers of someone with a dead-end life and a reliance on things he can't have.

And to make it worse, he has to climb the stairs to get back into his room.

He avoids the one which creaks.

Dream lies on his bed with his hands resting upon his stomach for about three minutes before he caves. The glow in the dark stars stuck to his slanted ceiling spiral out of sight as he sits up again, pressing the heels of his palms deep into his eye sockets until he sees them reappear on the insides of his eyelids. His body moves on autopilot across his room. He sticks his head out of the door and yells, "I'm calling George! Don't use the phone. *Please*."

The muted sound of his mom's *wasn't going to* is cut off when he slams his bedroom door so hard the window frame rattles, shoulders drawing up to his ears because he hadn't meant to.

His hands betray him more often than not, body maladjusted to adulthood. Dream's limbs don't fit in his bed anymore, knees forced to bend so he can press his feet against the footboard, and he's lost track of how many times he's smacked his head against his door frame because he's not used to being so tall. Heat suppressants feel strange against the back of his throat, but he's terrified of the alternative. Something about it feels a little like letting go of childhood—embracing the unfamiliar ways in which his body works, and accepting his limbs are longer now and he goes into heat if left uninterfered. Empty pill bottles mock him from the bottom of his drawers.

He pulls the phone onto the bed and sits with his back pressed against the wall. It's easier like this, because he knows the house better than his unfamiliar flesh and it feels as though it's propping him up with plasterboard hands and maternal mortar. *Thump*. His skull falls back against it, and it's easier. Even though the phone's in his lap now, and he's pushing at the buttons, and the receiver is sandwiched between his ear and his shoulder, and he's always thought the dial tone sounds a little like a flatlining heart rate monitor-

"Hello?"

Evidently, George is at his flat for once. His voice sounds horrendous. Not because he's hungover this time, or perhaps on his twentieth consecutive hour awake, but because he sounds less and less like the waves cresting upon the shore every time Dream speaks to him.

"It's me."

“Dream,” George sighs. It’s confusing. No matter how many times Dream stares into the mirror and wonders why he’s such a failure compared to George, who seems to forget him so easily, George still says his name like it’s made of honey and milk tea. Warm and wistful. He can almost trick himself into believing George misses him.

“You didn’t tell me you’re coming home.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

They sit in silence for a moment, neither of them quite willing to flick the safety off. Silence is comfortable, silence can’t be misinterpreted as easily as words, so maybe that’s why George doesn’t like to call him so much now he’s moved to the city. Maybe he can tell Dream notices the way his voice sounds like humming tube trains and rain falling into potholes rather than gulls and heather rustling in the sea breeze. Dream wants to tell him he doesn’t give a fuck.

He remains silent. Silence is safe.

“I meant to tell you, really.” George says eventually, although none of the syllables are fully formed so it’s more of a murmur than anything else.

Yeah, but you didn’t.

“You know how it is,” George continues when he’s met with more silence. “I just lose track of the days. Forgot to call. I’m sorry.”

Dream doesn’t know how it is. It’s been fifty nine days since he last spoke to George, and one hundred and eighty five since George called him to mutter *Merry Christmas* through a field of crackling distance.

The last time he saw George was six hundred and forty six days ago, and Dream doesn’t know why he’s counting anymore. He isn’t so certain George is even real. But he wants so badly to *believe*, so he dials George’s number every month and waits with his fingers crossed for the line to click—if it doesn’t, he’ll wait until the first of next month because then it sometimes coincides with— with—

George’s birthday.

And he’s not sure why he’s holding on with both bloody palms, but he knows he’ll continue to do it until George acquires the guts to tell him to *fuck off*. It’d probably be easier if he did. He can’t just forget an entire childhood of swimming into cliff caves, climbing onto the flat rocks sticking up from the sea when the tide’s out, tombstoning even though he never wanted to, sleeping in the abandoned lighthouse when his mom thought he was at George’s house and George’s mom thought he was at Dream’s house.

Sometimes he wonders whether that damn lighthouse is to blame for all of this. Because the beacon’s out now, and they don’t have anything to guide them through the dark waters of adulthood and back to shore.

“It’s okay. You must be very busy...with uni and everything.” Even though it’s summer, and Dream still doesn’t know any of the grades George received on his papers. Even though he said he wanted more than anything to be told. Even though they’re best friends.

When he receives nothing in reply, Dream stretches out both hands like a child stranded between shopping aisles. Reaching for anything he might recognise. “George?”

“Sorry,” George says for the third time. Dream is counting. “It’s just early.” There’s a rustling of

sheets over the line, quiet enough Dream hadn't noticed it over the push and pull of blood in his ears. Not until George pointed it out.

Guilt squeezes hard at his throat. "I didn't think about that," he mumbles.

"Don't beat yourself up over it. I know you will."

Dream freezes in place with his gaze focused on early, blue sunshine. Because he can feel the edges of his mind tipping towards a pit of blame, dead set on the conclusion that George will hate him even more now he's woken him up at a silly hour in the morning. But George can still anticipate him. Going weeks at a time without speaking to George makes it easy to forget how well he knows him, so he feels a little like he's being read by a stranger, having all his pages rifled through without his permission. He's vulnerable even with the barbed phone line to protect him.

"Are you going back to sleep?" He shouldn't ask it. It'll only make George hang up. But he doesn't want to force George to talk to him if he doesn't want to, so he offers an out with repentant hands.

He thinks he'll do anything for George.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Oh. Okay."

"I'll be back next week."

Dream nods, then remembers George is lying in a different room with bed covers over his body instead of under it. Their pillows are different. The colour of the sky might even be different, but he doesn't know because George has never invited him to come and visit.

His sky is grey. At some point during the conversation, the clouds have blocked out more and more of the sun so he can't feel its warmth against his skin so well. He imagines George's sky as the colour of hope and breakfast honey, but a selfish part of him wants it to be overcast in the city just as it is on the coast. And he doesn't know why the simple reassurance that their sky is the same would make him feel so much better.

"I'll see you then," he says, tilted upwards at the end like a question.

There's no reply, because George has already hung up.

Goodbye comes in the form of the droning dial tone.

Dream hates waiting more than anything.

Mostly because he pays so much attention to anything to do with George he can't stop himself from counting the sunrises, the minutes, the lines between the paving stones he steps on while he's waiting and waiting for the weekend. And the seconds tick slower when they're numbered. Ironic, since he swears his years are beginning to slip by faster, as if they're running out and he's destined to hit a wall sooner or later. Slam his skull into abrasive brick.

The turning of the weekdays saps the strength out of his limbs, so he finds himself sitting in front of his window with his head on the desk the Saturday George is supposed to come home. His vision is coloured angry red. Light falls across his face, but he refuses to close the blind in case George shows up at the end of the road and he misses it. Only his eyelids protect him from afternoon sun glare.

Dream must be a weak man, because he ends up with his knees bent, his feet shoved against the end of his bed, and the mattress dipping beneath his oversized body before evening falls. He drifts in and out of mindless sleep, dreaming about the weather and the bakery down the road and his mom calling him for dinner and George, and George, and George. Sleep becomes warmer than the heat of sitting in the window. Until he's forgetting all about George altogether, content to doze in the middle of the sea.

When he sits up, the sunlight is bleeding towards the earth.

He runs downstairs, hair flung every which way and saliva drying at the corner of his mouth. A hand rubs over it as an afterthought, but he still has sand sticking to his eyelashes and the taste of death wrapped around his tongue.

“Is George back?” he asks urgently, words slipping around on a wet esplanade.

His mom turns around with a cooking spoon in one hand. Upon the stove, a pot bubbles. The kitchen smells of home—of cinnamon and turmeric, of spotless counters and floor cleaner. But her scent sticks out in the middle of it, orange juice souring as she appraises the state of him.

“George...yes, he got home earlier,” she says, guilt dripping from her crow’s feet. “I didn’t want to wake you, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go say hi.”

“Clay-”

He’s already halfway up the hallway, stepping out onto the street in his socks because George’s front door is a matter of metres from his own. The anemones sitting on the front wall greet him, petals waving in the wind as he crosses towards the house directly opposite from his own. Sunlight leaks out of the bottom of the street. Upon the road, cars from the last decade shove themselves against the hedgerows. He doesn’t pay attention to the grass sprouting from cracks in the tarmac, because he’s standing in front of the door already, and his knuckles sound cold against the wood.

Dream only notices how much his stomach is twisting when George’s mom swings the door open, glasses pushed up onto the top of her head. Her roots are greying, and he tries not to stare. She smiles at him with an older version of George’s. Even her scent is just the same as his—the smell of sea asters and saltwater climbing up dragon scale pebbles and hot sugar passing over the counters of beachside vendors.

He presses his lips together so he won’t sob.

“Hi, Clay,” she says, like she’s been expecting him. Her accent makes his heart squeeze because it’s so perfectly familiar, but something about it is ever so slightly wrong.

It sounds nicer on George, he thinks.

“Hi.”

“You must be-”

"Is George around?" he asks hastily, rocking back and forth on his feet as he attempts to school his features. If he didn't, he's certain he'd be smiling like an idiot with excitement flowing from every pore, golden and all consuming.

She gives him a sympathetic look, fingers curled around the door in the exact spot Dream knows the blue paint is chipped. "He's asleep right now. Bless him, went straight up into his room and crashed as soon as he got in. I've barely seen him myself," she says, words stilted in a way they shouldn't be.

Dream is too busy fending off disappointment to pay much attention. "Oh, okay. He must be exhausted."

"Mmm, the journey takes a while. He avoided it for as long as he could, didn't he? Travel sickness and all."

"He did." Dream can't remember George ever saying he suffers from travel sickness, not even when he'd come on holiday with them after finishing his GCSEs. He'd spent the whole car journey asleep with his head on the window. "Um, should I come back tomorrow? Or...another time?"

"I can't guarantee he'll be around." Her expression is cloudy with something Dream's never seen before. "But you should. You're good for him, I think."

Strange wording. Dream backs away up the garden path without consciously willing himself to, until he's got one hand on the gate and the other fiddling with the ends of his hair. "Okay," he says, stepping back onto the pavement, back to safety. "I'll see you soon."

"See you, Clay."

The gate shuts at the same time as the door slams. He tries not to think about how cold it sounds, how final, almost identical to the sound of the last nail being hammered into the edge of a coffin.

His mom is standing in the doorway when he re-enters his house, her face crumpled with sympathy.

He's fucking sick of it.

The stairs aren't comforting when he climbs back up them to his room, ensuring he presses his feet over every single creaky floorboard so the sound of the house complaining will cut through the silence and make him feel as if he's not so alone. Then he's slumping back onto his bed, the sheets still warm. It smells like sea heather, too much like George.

He looks at his ceiling. Counts his heartbeats. Avoids doing something stupid, like staring through his open blind instead of imitation constellations.

Dream's house is befitting of a fading tiny town, with stairs which creak and rooms all crammed on top of each other. All the houses on the street are the same. Detached, with wide door frames he's susceptible to whacking his skull against. A lane runs between his house and George's even though he calls it a street, and there are no road markings to distinguish it from the winding mess of tarmac spooling in and out of the village. George's door is eggshell blue. His looks more like mint. His mom called it *quaint* in a shitty accent when they first moved in, although he doesn't remember what exactly she was talking about. He'd been too small to remember much of anything back then, but for some reason her voice lingers in the back of his mind.

Most importantly, George and Dream have both been shoved into the topmost floors of their respective houses, with flat windows at the front despite the slant of the roofs. And because the

street—the lane, he mentally corrects—is so narrow, they have no problem seeing into each other's bedrooms. More so when it's dark out and they've left their lights on.

Just like it is now.

He really shouldn't look. Even if they'd had no problem with it before, a lot has changed in two years.

It takes ninety heartbeats spent staring up at the star stickers before he relents. He's got no spine when it comes to George.

Still, he convinces himself it's not weird by sliding into his desk chair instead of staring straight out of the window.

His fingers fiddle with the pot of stationary he hasn't touched since he sat here revising for his A Levels. None of which he obtained, but it was the thought that counted. He still remembers having to phone George on results day and tell him he failed all three with tears in his eyes because it was the first time he realised he wasn't cut out for the world and the world wasn't cut out for him. It was made worse because George was safely tucked away into a good university with his straight A's and his head screwed on tight and a voice which crackled with worsening unfamiliarity every time Dream spoke to him.

The thought of his results sheet makes his stomach turn. He sits up a little straighter in his chair, hoping and hoping to just glimpse—

An open blind, a dip in a normally vacant mattress, a lump in the sheets he's so used to seeing dusty. The overhead light is carelessly left on, illuminating dark hair feathered against the pillow. Dream can't even see George's face, but the realisation he's really in the room across from him for the first time in two years makes his heart squeeze hard. The comforter rises and falls. George is alive, George is breathing, George is mere metres away from Dream with his head on a starched pillow and he's real.

Dream stops looking once he's certain George is really there, neck burning with shame. He shouldn't have done it in the first place, peered through open blinds when George has been trying to distance himself for the last two years. But he did it anyway, and now he has the image of George wrapped up in his sheets to fill his chest with jarred honey.

Fuck.

Dream is certain George is avoiding him.

He doesn't cross the road again, fearful his mom might look at him with more pity in her eyes, more saccharine sympathy lining her cheeks as he returns home empty-armed with a hole in his chest. So he sits at his desk, and pretends to read. But his eyes flicker up to George's window every so often, willing the blinds to roll up and George to be revealed. They've been shut since

some time last night.

Even if they did, Dream doesn't know if he'd want George to see him sitting here, with his fingers pushing past page after page and his eyes blatantly absent from the words. He wishes he were invisible. He feels like he is most of the time. Gazes flit right past him when he's working, gliding over his shoulders as if he's part of the counter.

It wasn't so bad in school. Everyone knew him because he was attached to George by the hip whenever they weren't in class; the pair of omegas who spent all their time together and lived on the same road.

He looks back at those memories with a better magnifying glass, and finds that they were forced to look at him because he was always next to George. George, with the prettiest butterfly wings, with the sharpest mind, with the sort of understated beauty that was alluring and hopeful and addictive. It didn't matter that he wasn't so aware of it, since everyone else was. Dream had friends because George had friends.

And when George left a year ahead of him, he didn't quite know what to do with himself. Something important was taken right out of his chest when he did, and now he's left with bullet wounds shot through ligaments and cartilage and bone so he's a patchwork person. He assumed that when George returned, he'd be sewn back together. He knows now that it's not good to rely on another person to pick up the pieces like that, especially because George doesn't need stitching up like he does. Stupid, he thinks. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

George's blind shifts.

Dream throws himself onto his bed, out of sight of the window. He stops moving, plays dead, and waits for the predatory shadow to move on from his broken body. At some point, he stops feigning unconsciousness, crossing over to a world where he can smell strawberry cupcakes instead of the scent of his own disappointed brimstone, cloves and tarragon instead of wilting heather.

Monday falls.

He goes into work like he always does, and spends his week being blissfully see-through.

"Bin day tomorrow," his mom says on one of the weekdays. He's not sure which one it is yet. She's flicking through a recipe book and copying out the ingredients onto a square from the memo block which resides next to the downstairs phone.

"Oh. Really?"

"It's not that strange, is it?"

Dream supposes it's not. He says so.

His mom raises an eyebrow, but she must be used to Dream's strange mannerisms by now, because he's greeted by the sight of grey roots again as she looks down at what she's doing. Her pen scratches over paper, an irregular rhythm he's neither comforted nor disturbed by. "Could you put the bins out?" she asks, with a glance at the rain clinging to the window. Stars glimmer from each rivulet. "I'm doing this."

Rather than enquiring what exactly 'this' is lest he be greeted by a sharp look and a lecture about household responsibility, Dream leaves through the back door and circles around to the side of the house. Where the bins are. It makes sense really, that something as ugly as knotted trash bags would be shoved out of sight and into metal cans where nobody has to look at them. Dream wonders what it would be like to be crammed into one, unwanted and worth zero.

Scorpius hangs low in the sky, woozy with summer. He can't help but relate as he pulls the bags free of the bins and clutches as many as he can, socks soaking through with the wetness slicking the concrete. It continues all the way from the side of his house to the front, where puddles lie in wait on the pavement and street lamps blink to life.

It's with trash bags in both hands that he sees George. For the first time in two years. Standing across the lane-street from him with one hand on the gate at the helm of his garden, lips parted in acknowledgement as Dream stares and stares across at him. Stargazing. The bags droop to the curb so he can look harder, step off the pathetically narrow pavement towards a star that's fallen from grace with all its sisters.

Oh, fucking hell.

Dream hypothesised to himself in his childhood bedroom that George might've changed in a way the stairs never could, but it doesn't mean he revels in being proven right.

Once upon a time he could point out all the things that made George *George*, just like he could point out the creaky floorboard outside his room and the stair with a dent in the middle of it. He used to be able to point at the tiny scar through George's eyebrow and explain where he got it. The clothes were from his grandparents more often than not, and the way he hummed under his breath was something he picked up from Dream when they were still tiny. Dream used to know how many freckles he had. Twenty-one on his face, seven on his forearm, twelve across both thighs.

But the way George stands is different now, with one hand in his pocket and his shoulders relaxed rather than tipping up and up towards his ears like a rabbit affronted by highway light. His clothes fit him better. The subtle swell of his abdomen presses against his shirt, and even from this distance Dream can tell it's not as soft as it used to be. Gloss protects his lips. Magenta bolts through the front of his hair, longer over his brows so he has to reach up periodically and push it back off his forehead to reveal eyes sharper than before. Dream thinks his nails might match.

There's a freckle under his left eye that wasn't there two years ago, and Dream doesn't know what to do with that information. To him, it's a day in the sun he wasn't around to remember.

"Hi," Dream breathes, careful not to speak too loud for fear of shattering the mirage.

"Hi." George doesn't breathe anything. He says it with full conviction, uncaring of how loud his voice is in the middle of the winding lane.

"You're back," he says dumbly.

"Yeah. You're still here." George smiles politely, and it brightens his face far more than the lamplight.

He runs a hand through his hair with a laugh that doesn't warm his stomach. "I don't have much choice. I'm not exactly academically gifted like you."

"There's nothing wrong with staying here," George says. Of course he does. He's not the one who has to wander around with sea spectres hovering over his shoulder and an empty room across the street from him. Dream thinks the way his pulse is thrumming in his neck might be resentment.

He steps towards George, who remains with his shoulders relaxed and a gentle smile spread across the bottom of his face as Dream reaches his side of the road.

His scent has changed. It's not like Dream's anymore, and he smells of something floral and fast paced and fashionable rather than of sleepy waves bumping into stone-faced cliffs. The violent announcement that they're not so alike makes his stomach drop like it does when he's standing partway up a cliff and George is telling him to *jump*.

"You smell different," Dream says, shocked.

It's not common for scents to fluctuate so dramatically, with the base notes upturned and transformed into something else entirely. Not unless trauma is involved, or experimental science, or *a shift in mentality so great the subject may as well have been born again*, Dream recalls from one of his old textbooks. Oh. Perhaps George was dead all along.

George realises what he means, and the soft smile present upon his face before dies. He turns towards his door, arms covering his chest defensively like he's terrified Dream will look too close and peel away his protective layers. Reveal something he doesn't want him to. "It's nothing," he says quickly.

Dream scrambles to hand George an out. "I guess you really hate this town, huh?"

He just hopes George doesn't hate him as much as he does the streets.

"I don't hate it, I just—" George breaks off. His jaw sets before he continues. "I don't know if I'd call it home anymore."

"You've moved on."

"Yeah," George says, looking right at him.

And for once, Dream doesn't want to sit around with his ear pressed to a receiver as he coaxes George to talk. It's late. If George doesn't want to talk to him, Dream would rather fuck off and cry himself to sleep where nobody's around to observe.

"I should get back inside. I'm just supposed to be putting the bins out." He shivers for emphasis, wearing a shirt unsuited for night time. He's really not that cold, but he's an omega, so he'd say he knows how to fake it.

"Goodnight, Dream. I missed you."

George disappears into his house, Dream disappears through his side gate.

Then why didn't you show it?

He sits with his back against outside bins, and allows the weight of what just happened to settle upon his shoulders.

George was pretty before, when he spent the majority of his time occupying the other side of Dream's bed and elbowing him in the middle of the night. When he sat on the school bus next to him and scribbled essays due on the same day, when he made Dream go swimming with him at stupid hours in the morning because he woke up when the sun got out of bed. But it was rosebud prettiness, muted pink and unaware of itself. Dream didn't feel out of place next to him back then.

Now his petals have opened, and George can plainly see how vibrant they are. It'd take an idiot to miss how people look at him. George is the smartest person he knows, so it's a matter of inevitability that he notices. His chin tips towards the horizon rather than towards the ground, the stem of his neck more confident in its stature, the flat of his palms facing the sun instead of drifting upwards to fiddle with his hair.

Full bodied thorns lie in wait for the blood of those who should dare take him for themselves. Dream feels too big, too oafish to approach George for fear he'll do something wrong and end up exactly where he started.

So George knows he's pretty. He must think of Dream as pretty pathetic in comparison.

It's Wednesday. He returns to the kitchen, and it's Wednesday.

Because Dream can't stop thinking about how pretty George is when he smiles, he takes it upon himself to break his world apart brick by brick the next day, after work. He's tired, and this is a bad idea. The thought of George's rose hue makes him do it anyway.

Dream presses the receiver to his ear and dials a different number than usual, one he was better acquainted with two summers ago when he sat on his desk in the middle of the night and looked at George through his window. The other end of the line connected to him. Eyes steady as they talked and talked into the early hours of morning, fingers pressing against the glass as though they were really standing right in front of each other as the sun woke up and the stars went to sleep. George's room is dark this time.

The dial tone is replaced by the sound of ringing, which is replaced by the sound of the phone from George's side of the street. His window's open, Dream confirms with a glance. And the blind is rolled up as it was before, but he can't pick out George amongst the scattered belongings which don't belong to him. Don't belong to *his* George, anyway. Clothes he doesn't recognise, books he couldn't understand even if he tried, CDs George must've listened to for the first time with people who aren't him.

But he's not jealous. That would be an overreaction.

He sets the phone back into place when forty two seconds have passed with the door remaining closed, because Dream might be stubborn, but he knows how to accept defeat when it's spelled out so blatantly for him. Silence shoots the dial tone in the foot. On his roof, seagulls scream out soliloquies at deafening volumes due to the thin layer of roof tiles protecting him from the barrage. Until they start to sound like loose phone lines too, and he can't do much more than shove his head between his pillow and his mattress to drown it out.

The stairs haven't moved around like they might in wizarding schools. The tide remains just as constant as always, and Dream decides he hates phone calls with the same amount of vigour as he has ever since George learnt to hate answering them.

This is the worst day of my life, is all Dream can think when he next sees George, because he's at work and he's not earning six figures like George will be a few years down the line.

The bell rings when George enters the shop, and he's wearing different clothes than he was the last time Dream saw him. Sand sweater, deep sea jeans. A ring the same colour as fishing net sits on his pointer finger, the sort of thing Dream would get stuck on everything it's possible to catch a ring on.

George doesn't see him until he walks up to the counter, which gives Dream plenty of time to appraise the magenta in his hair, the shadows attached to his eyes, the way his laces are undone and he doesn't bother to fix them. Somehow, he doesn't look like a prick. Not compared to Dream, who's feeling a little like the invisible man this morning.

"You work here?" George asks neutrally. He doesn't sound disgusted, which Dream supposes is relieving, but he also doesn't seem to be particularly thrilled about it. There's nothing to be thrilled about anyway, since Dream is fiddling with the buttons on the register for a rock bottom wage as the world passes him by. For some reason, he wants George's approval anyway.

"Yep," Dream says, collecting the yellow price stickers from everything George puts on the counter. The numbers creep upwards. Past what he earns in five hours, although that's not difficult.

"I thought you wanted to work for the coastguard."

A grimace crosses his face, one that leaves an aftertaste of soured milk in his mouth. "I did. But they wanted alphas for that, so I couldn't do it. It's sort of difficult to do anything really, unless you're exceptional. Like you."

"Oh."

"I would've told you if you asked," he mutters, unsure as to how true it is. Tell George he couldn't even get volunteer work because he had the wrong standing, when George was just the same as him and managed to fight his way onto a good course at a good university.

Now it's George's turn to frown. Dream regrets saying it when he does, loathes to see George's lips turning downwards and his eyebrows pulling together because of him. "Would you have wanted to tell me?"

Dream freezes, caught once again by a boy who knows him better than he wants to admit.

"Probably not," he relents. George spends his time excelling in an alpha dominated field, so it'd no doubt be laughable to him that Dream is stuck here for the rest of his life, as good as put up for auction. "Embarrassing."

"So I never asked. You tell me everything you want me to hear, even though I wouldn't have cared."

“Wouldn’t you?”

“No. I’m not an asshole.”

“I never thought you were,” he says, the tips of his cheeks hot and uncomfortable.

He reads out George’s total, and tries to do the maths as quickly as possible when he’s handed two notes stuck together with pocket crumples. The coins come out of the register into clammy hands. George is watching him with a quiet little smile that looks like the moon when it’s brand new and crescent shaped. He’s certain George finds this amusing, watching him do maths when he hates it so much.

What George doesn’t know is how much time he’s spent counting everything to do with him.

His palm splayes out flat on the counter, too big. When he draws his hand away, ten pence pieces glimmer waxy silver, appearing as though they should be silhouetted by irregular craters.

“We should do something,” Dream says, uncertain of himself. “Since you’re back now.”

“Maybe.” Plastic crumples as George grabs the bag, sliding his change deep into the front of his jeans so it can jingle around on the way back home. Or wherever it is he’s going next. “Maybe another time. I’m kind of busy, at the moment. I’ll see you around,” is all George offers before he’s waltzing out of Dream’s life again. He must be fairly used to doing it by now.

Dream stares at the door as it closes, bell ringing like loose pennies.

“What the fuck is there to do in this town?” he mutters to himself.

In the evening, he trudges downstairs and sits with his mom in front of the TV. Static wriggles around when she turns it off, and if he looks too hard he can imagine seeing shapes emerging from the storm cloud. A cassette player, an axe, a guitar, moon shaped glasses, and George. Then it’s all George, because his mind’s decided it’ll stick to the thought of him with better fitting clothes and a distinct smell of roses with dew sliding off the petals, of halogen lights and bubbling cola. Rose quartz cheeks, eyes the colour of the earth even though nothing about George is steady and unchanging.

Perhaps if George’s eyes held oceans like his, he’d be more familiar.

“What’s wrong?” his mom asks, setting the remote down on the coffee table next to a cup ring.

“Nothing?”

“You’re in a mood.”

“I’m not.”

She crosses her feet on the coffee table, socked heels dangerously close to where a stack of coasters sits. “Yes you are. It’s about George, isn’t it?”

Dream blinks slowly as the ceiling begins to press down upon him, and he decides he despises how claustrophobic english houses in english towns are despite how normal it is to him now. She’s still staring at him. The same look she’d worn when she first told him about George returning home is stretched over her face. Except there are no sea flowers to hide behind this time, and no early morning bliss to worm its vines into the space between them and excuse his clipped answers.

The wind caresses the side of the house, moaning as it rushes over the roof one story over their heads. *Speak*, it says.

“He doesn’t want to see me,” he sighs, resting his cheek against her shoulder and allowing the smell of clementine to engulf his oversized form. And miraculously, he begins to feel better.

“Have you been bothering him?” She sounds as if she’s expecting it, words coloured with severity. Dream knows she’s usually right when she sounds like this, but it doesn’t mean he’s any less apprehensive about it. Even if he’s almost twenty.

“No...”

“Clay, have you forgotten why he’s back home in the first place?”

“His grandma’s funeral,” he answers, quick as the heartbeat of a bluebird. Blue, blue, blue.

Oh, shit.

“Mmhmm. He probably needs some space, alright? I know you forget these things sometimes.”

She’s not being patronising about it on purpose, but his jaw still sets defensively. “He hasn’t even mentioned it.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to. Maybe it’s easier for him if he doesn’t.”

“She’s been sick for months-”

“Yes, and he’s been away for two years,” she says, disapproving. “He probably regrets that he didn’t see her before...well. Not much he can do about it now.”

Despite his irritation with George’s tendency to ghost through the streets as if he doesn’t live in the same town as Dream after all, he finds defensive bitterness stinging the backs of his eyes. Roses instead of sea heather, detachment from the place he’s supposed to call home. Something George won’t explain to him. “It’s not his fault.”

“I’m just saying, he could’ve come back more often-”

“You don’t know that.”

He sounds too assertive, voice swelling as if he’s an alpha who can afford to make dangerous eye contact and have people agree with his opinion for no reason. In all honesty, Dream isn’t sure why he’s defending George, but a little part of him is clinging onto the shred of hope that says George had a reason for staying away for so long.

“I- I’m sorry,” he tries. “I didn’t mean to say it like that.”

His mom frowns. "You're tired, aren't you?"

Now she's said it, Dream's limbs feel heavier than they did before. He wants nothing more than to forget about all this, because his thoughts ring haywire and his heart beats in six letters, single syllables. "I guess so. I'm not sure why," he says, lifting his head from her shoulder. The clock on the mantelpiece displays witching hour all of a sudden, but he swears it was early evening just a minute ago. Another reminder that his seconds are tipping through the hourglass. "Oh. It's later than I thought."

"Then go to bed. I'm not stopping you."

Dream doesn't need to be told twice.

He trips on his way upstairs, which should really serve as a bad omen. After sticking a toothbrush in his mouth and pulling pyjamas with moth bitten holes over his body, Dream sits in the middle of his room. It's dark out. His eyes strain to read the titles of the books lined up on his shelf. The streetlamp closest to his house throws amber into all the crevices and slows his limbs down with tree sap, so he's even less inclined to get off his ass and into bed than he would be if he were still standing.

A quick glance behind him confirms the mattress seems a million miles away.

But his legs are beginning to needle with stinging discomfort. He supposes he should really go to bed instead of sitting with his head tipped back against the mattress and stars gazing through the window at him.

So he presses his palms flat against the floor and shoves himself up, wincing as his head spins in tangled yarn circles. He moves to stand in front of his window, hand outstretched for the cord that'll send the blind unrolling over the glass and block the flow of light. His toe stubs against the leg of his desk, and it's another bad omen.

He freezes in front of the window, his heart in his throat.

For years and years, George and Dream taped notes to their windows, arranged blue and yellow post it notes into letters, rolled the blinds up at the exact same time by accident and broken into fits of silent laughter every few mornings. They'd watched the same trees dance through the seasons, the same cars pull in and out of their spots outside each house, sat facing each other during exam season and pretended to study until one of them stood up and hollered '*beach?*' through the open window. Forgotten revision countless times to swim in sea caves. Flicked flashlights on and off in the middle of the night the summer they decided to learn morse code.

But Dream thinks George must've forgotten how clearly he can see into his room after two years away in the city.

He stands with one hand on the cord, throat constricting because George has left his light on.

The blind is open.

And George is face down on his bed, three fingers pushing into his ass with a bottle of lube discarded by his knee. Dark eyelashes brush against his cheekbones. The peach flesh of his bottom lip is seized tight between his teeth to trap moans upon his tongue, allowing them to die as shuddering breaths as his chest heaves up and down. He's pumping his fingers at the sort of angle which suggests he knows exactly what he's doing, and it's evident in the way he visibly trembles with every slow thrust.

Dream's stomach clenches tight into a knot. Neatly organised thoughts tangle once again, cast out to sea in the middle of a gale so his vision becomes watery around the edges and roaring blood fills his ears. Pale fingers brand themselves right into his frontal lobe. Thighs of the same pallor. Until Dream's mind is swept away upon the current, off down dangerous, dangerous paths. Despite himself, he wonders what George's fingers would feel like inside of him, how his inner thighs would feel between his teeth, how gently he'd gasp and whine into Dream's mouth if they were to kiss.

If they were to kiss properly, this time. With their tongues sliding against each other and their lips shining with slick and their cocks dragging together delectably slow.

A moth careens right past Dream's face, and it's exactly what he needs to snap him back into his senses.

He yanks at the cord. The blind rolls down so he's plunged into complete darkness, not even the meagre glow of the streetlamp to illuminate his burning cheeks. He presses his palms to his face, willing and willing his skin to cool down and his blood to stop rushing through his veins with the force of a damn tidal wave.

What the fuck?

Dream has thought about kissing George before. Usually when crammed into a rowdy lunch table or seated around a driftwood fire, when hypotheticals are tossed around like cheap cigs so he ends up being asked if he'd rather die or make out with his best friend.

Well, obviously I'd kiss George, he'd say with a wrinkled nose, fingers drumming absently against the edge of the bench.

Even though he's an omega? came the objection.

Then Dream had to consider how bad kissing George would really be, and concluded it would go exactly as he'd expect kissing another omega would. A little gross, sure, but not totally unpleasant. *I'd rather kiss George than die, c'mon*, he said, and the conversation moved swiftly along to their GCSE maths exam. He was never sure which was worse. And if George was staring at the pen scrawled over the table with a frown etched across his features, Dream chalked it up to the prospect of kissing his best friend.

This is nothing like year eleven lunch hour.

Dream stands with his palms cupped to his cheeks and mortification burning behind his eyes. If he thinks about it, his boxers feel too tight and his jeans even tighter, but that seems an awful lot like confronting something he's not in the least bit prepared to deal with right now.

So he doesn't think about it.

Not exactly.

He thinks about all the justification as to why he's standing here with panic squeezing his trachea and heat squeezing his stomach, sifting through all the evidence like he's trying to figure out one of his maths papers. Except his pencil lead won't stop snapping and the numbers keep falling off the page and the desk's on fire. In other words, it's next to impossible. But Dream is determined, so he ends up with his pathetic little justifications swirling around his head instead of something stupid, like *attraction* to George. Which would be unthinkable.

He chalks it up to his lack of a sex life, the way the sky and the sea sucks his energy. Dream hasn't

had sex in five months. Or was it six? Either way, the sight of George doing...*that* to himself is inevitably going to cause some sort of reaction, and he's just in the middle of a dry spell. Nothing more to it than that, he reasons. It's a hasty conclusion, but one he's willing to cling to like an orange lifeboat in the middle of the arctic.

It's fine.

The sheets accept him, forgiving and protective. His pillows smell of heather like they always do, and with the stars glowing at him from his ceiling, he tells himself he needs to stop being so tragically single.

It rains on the day of the funeral.

Fitting, he thinks as he stares at his face in the mirror and forces his top button through its designated hole. George would've been up since the newborn hours of the morning, straightening his shirt and buttoning it with freezing fingers as he prepared to go to the crematorium. She wanted the service afterwards, his mom had said at some point during the week. Dream doesn't quite remember which day it was, or what he'd been doing when she explained the layout of things. They all look the same.

His parents are waiting for him by the door when he makes his way downstairs, clad in black with an umbrella only big enough for the pair of them. Dream ends up trailing behind, mist cleansing his face of sleep.

The chapel teeters close to the sea, where grey land dips towards the pebble beach printed onto the postcards stacked in peeling racks all along the esplanade. Outdated shops with plastic spades in plastic bins upon plastic floors, bruised by the constant haze of sea mist clinging to the road. Along the street, town dwellers creep with their hoods over their faces. They don't hurry like they might in the city. Instead, they set one foot after another in time with the waves like the sea controls the residents, strips their autonomy and sets their minds out exactly the same way. The spectacle is observed by the railings running between the esplanade and the rocks, broken up by lamp posts with wilting flowers in hanging baskets. Bauble lights flicker on and off. Dream looks for the wandering feet of tourists, but only finds carbon copy after carbon copy of people he's known his whole life.

People just like him, with more lines across their faces to trick him into thinking he's different.

He shakes off the feeling of cobwebs trailing over the back of his neck, and ducks into the chapel.

It's not any better. Even the walls smell of salt, the floor is tainted with brine, and through stained blue windows he can hear nothing but the press of the wind and the swell of weary waves.

Supposedly, the sea is symbolic of all kinds of things—untamed power, strength, faith, the courage

to pour outside of the lines when everything is drawn in black and white. Dream isn't so charmed. He has a tendency to fall asleep to the steady lull of the tide, and sand grits between the folds of his joints, his clothes, his bedsheets. An unshakeable curse, draining his lifeforce with every second he spends wandering around in the town. Eyes wide, bones seabound as egg rock beckons.

Organs remind him of iron lungs. He sits on a bench too uncomfortable and listens to droning melodies drowning out the tide as he waits for the service to begin, so he can count the seconds until it's over. He's not entirely sure why he has to be here—his parents are friends with George's, but now George looks at him like he's hiding something. Like he wants to keep Dream at arm's length. He's listening to a eulogy that isn't for his ears, and there's nothing he wants more than to trudge home in the rain so he can spend his day the same as he does the rest of the time.

George stands at the front, head angled towards the floor. His clothes cling to his shoulders, follow the curve of his back, strain tighter around his hips than around his stomach. Dream's tongue dries, dehydrated by saltwater. He swallows hard and snaps his gaze back to the front with a steady exhale, reminding himself George is as good as a stranger now, George wouldn't appreciate seaweed eyes all over him.

Dream shouldn't have looked.

The service flows on around him, and he's the river rock stuck in the middle to disrupt the current. So much for being invisible. The harder he tries to stop thinking about pulling George over the pew and pressing their foreheads together until his tributaries are filled with rose, the more it happens. Then it's not as simple as hugging George, and he's thinking about their lips touching in the rain, then George with his thighs spread in the middle of his comforter, then slick dripping from his rim like precipitation. More, his mind cackles. Wrapping his hand around George's neck and squeezing against his scent gland, giggling to each other as he pushes his hips to his ass, worshipping George instead of kneeling at an altar with tears tripping down his cheeks. Thunder, lightning, rain.

When he was younger, Dream believed his parents could read his mind, so he'd sob himself to sleep every time he lied to them, certain they'd confront him about it in the morning. Of course, they never did. But the paranoia made his stomach twist so viscerally he recognises it now, as it resurfaces at the beginning of his adult life in a way he doesn't know how to sort out.

Dream wants to disappear when the service comes to a close, walk himself through fiery gates because he knows he deserves it. He's thought all these things while he's in a fucking *church*, and he's terrified everyone knows.

Afterwards, the atmosphere is muted.

Like someone's just died.

Dream stifles a grimace against the rim of his teacup, crossing and uncrossing his legs as people he knows better than he wants to mill around in dark monotony. They murmur amongst themselves, talk about the weather and the tourism industry and everything except what's actually happened. He wonders if it's disrespectful. Voices are lost to the vault of the ceiling, and it's easy to focus on the blue windows instead of everyone else's mundane lives.

Not any more mundane than your own, the voice of his inner self taunts.

He's basking in the light of rain clouds and stained glass when George appears in his periphery, the rims of his eyes rubbed raw even as he attempts to hide it. It's only for a second. As soon as Dream's heart jumps in his chest, George is vanishing out of the front entrance, fingers curling

around hardwood the last thing he sees of him before the strip of light recedes.

The cup is set down on a side table covered in embroidery before Dream follows George towards the doors, casting a glance over the room to confirm that nobody's paying attention to him. Blissfully, they aren't. Then again, they never are.

He finds him with a cigarette between his lips, a bad habit leaving for the city hasn't managed to shake. Rain sticks his hair to his forehead, water rolls off his eyelashes, and pink blossoms across his cheeks to combat the chill. With the stance of a man washed up somewhere he doesn't want to be, George presses his back against the stone wall beside the door, dark eyes reflecting the sky.

When the door shuts, George's gaze snaps up to his face, and his shoulders relax once he realises it's just Dream. Or perhaps it's how tall he is, how long his limbs are, which make him impossible to miss. Then George tensing up again, caving in on himself as he realises the miles and miles of distance stretching out in between them. They stare at each other, at an impasse.

"I'm sorry," Dream begins, shuddering as ice creeps along his scalp and into the neck of his shirt. "I just wanted some air."

"Or you followed me." George flicks at the cig.

"No..." It's the least convincing thing he's ever said, even if George didn't know him inside out. But he does, and it's so pathetically obvious he's lying that Dream considers curling up in a puddle and waiting for his life to bleed into the ground. "I'll go back inside," he hurries, reminded of how embarrassment burns.

You clearly don't want to see me.

"Dream," George says as he's stepping back into the building, skin crawling with the feeling of cold walls and dusty candlesticks to illuminate them.

He stops. George still says his name the same as he did over the phone, as though it's something to be treasured upon his tongue before being permitted to flood across his lips and land crumpled in the space between them. As smoke spills from George, he waits for his features to melt, for him to ask Dream to stay next to him as gentle rain exposes the lines of his chest.

"Yes?"

"Don't tell my mum, okay?" he says instead. "She thinks I quit."

The sound his heart makes as it collides with the bottom of his stomach is equivalent to the slam of a church door, a coffin lid, a body bag tossed into the sea. "Yeah," he struggles, praying George won't notice how his voice breaks in the middle of it. "Don't worry about it."

"Thanks."

As expected, the weight of how he thinks about George doesn't leave Dream alone. It follows him around, breathing down his neck as it reminds him of all the places he's thought about kissing George, sucking his skin between his teeth, running his tongue along the curve of his neck where his scent gland sits. He waits for the angel sitting on his opposite shoulder to wave its hands around and dismiss the darkness, but it never happens.

And Dream decides he needs to get laid.

Fast.

To his credit, he's good at getting things done when they're urgent, and he imagines thinking about George in this sort of way constitutes *pretty fucking urgent*. He just needs to be fucked properly, and he'll stop seeing George's fingers every time he closes his goddamn eyes. It's a simple hypothesis, and more importantly, one he knows is going to ring true.

So he ends up with a straw between his lips, lime juice sweetening his tongue, and an alpha he vaguely knows from school kissing up the side of his neck. It's nice. It makes him feel like he's worth something after all when the alpha ruts against his ass with a stiffening cock, it makes him feel as though he's not as untouchable as he thinks.

In reality, it's eleven o'clock on a Monday, and they're all alone in the saddest corner of the village in the saddest corner of England. They might as well be dead to the world.

"Come home with me?" the alpha asks. He's full of questions. He likes how Dream failed school because it makes him more dependent, he likes how tall Dream is because it makes him feel more assertive, and he likes it when Dream doesn't say much and instead gazes at him with empty eyes. He does it more. Dream likes feeling as if the price stapled to his ear is meant for diamond rather than copper.

He makes sure he looks as dumb as he feels, with big, docile eyes, and nods sweetly.

The alpha lives in the part of town nearest to the cliff, with sweeping views of the sea which spell out blood as blue as the water and coffers of faded grandeur shoved between every splintering gable. This might've been a second home before the world forgot about their sleepy little town, so now the paint is chipping off the veranda and the box hedge is ridden with disease. Waves tumble below. Dream wishes to join the water, to fall backwards off this cliff away from peeling window frames and cracked roof slates so he might be born again.

He wonders if the house wishes to take the plunge too.

Perhaps it would be better to drown now than spend the rest of time dilapidating.

Dream waits for his cock to stir as he's pushed against the back of the door and kissed halfway breathless, as he's led up two flights of stairs past greying banisters and feature mirrors stuck to the walls. Money, his mind supplies. He could move into this house with this alpha one day, inherit it with grateful hands and learn to walk around as silently as he did when he was a child. And he would never have to worry about anything more than dusting the mantelpieces, appearing pretty in the middle of a bed as if he were one of the ornaments too.

Boring, is all he can think. The sound of the waves lulls him to sleep.

Now they're in a bedroom. There's still laundry dotted about on the floor in the pattern of misaligned stars, bad fortune, fate turned rotten with foxglove. It's not meant to be.

Dream bites his lip with determination anyway and allows himself to be undressed, to be pushed

onto the mattress to support his weight with wrongly lined palms, to be opened by hasty fingers. Any minute now. Any minute now he'll feel the tightening of his lower stomach and the wetness dripping down the back of his thighs-

It never comes.

A lubed cock pushes in too fast. Too big, too aggressive. His shoulders rock forwards into the pillows robotically, the headboard jostles in metronome uniformity, and a grey haze casts over his vision with oppressive monotony. An ache settles into the base of his lungs. He stomachs it for seventy two seconds before he decides this alpha isn't paying attention to him.

"Can you stop?" he asks, crystalline clinging to his eyelashes.

Mercifully, the alpha manages to pick out his words from the haze of sea heather and beachside sugar, because he's pulling his cock out of Dream's ass as soon as he says it. Even so, Dream can still imagine the knot pressing against his rim, a threat of everything he's supposed to want. A reminder of everything he doesn't.

"Did I do something wrong?" the alpha asks, concern indistinguishable from an ego in tatters.

You're a shit fuck, Dream wants to say, but it'd make him sound a little too assertive. He doesn't know how well that would go down, since alphas hate it when they're told *no*. They hate omegas like Dream when they're not simpering in submission, singing praises they don't mean because it's what society tells them they ought to do in order to survive.

So he softens his voice, looks downwards instead of straight on. "No, you're great," he lies. "Just don't feel well. I should head home, or something."

"Sleep here," he says, and Dream can't decide if it's worse that real concern laces each syllable.

Sleep here, in a bed too hot with covers too thick and arms too strong gripping onto his torso. A window with the curtains left open, sunrise spilling across his face too early and prying his eyes open by force. Dream just wants to go home. He wants to stand in his room and glance across at George's even though it'll make him remember everything he's supposed to be running away from, collapse into soft blankets and revel in the way his skin feels against the sheets when he doesn't have to share. Something about it is sacred to him. Something important in burying his nose into perfumed sheets and inhaling deep, comforted by all things familiar and safe and sentimental. Something in his nature, whatever that entails.

"I want to go home."

It's too much, even he can hear that. Bare words without anything to soften them to politeness, pushed through bitter lips and pointed teeth. But Dream doesn't regret it, because the alpha allows him to wobble to his feet and shuck his clothes back on without trying to coax him back into bed. He's watched with blank eyes, and he doesn't regret it. He doesn't. Each article of clothing he reattaches to his limbs is armour, both from the stiff chill of British nights and the prying eyes of strangers.

"Come here."

He steps closer to the alpha and curses himself for listening so easily.

He curses himself more when he ends up with a phone number scrawled across his forearm in marker pen, a bloody reminder of endless dial tones and abandoned receivers. He should've been more direct. He should've said *fuck off* and made it clear he never wants to talk to this alpha again.

He didn't, and now the ink smudges across his skin so it matches the dark handprints blossoming over his hips.

Dream starts to cry as the door clicks behind him.

He isn't sure why. There's always been this pit of dissatisfaction residing in the centre of his chest, event horizon and all. But now he's been given a telescope that can actually capture the extent of the emptiness, so he's over aware of how nothing seems to make sense anymore. Especially not the future. Not even the Hubble can pick out fate and tell him what the fuck he's supposed to be doing besides cocking his head to one side and waiting for someone more perfect than the rest to sink their teeth into the junction between his neck and jaw.

The stars blink overhead. He doesn't need to see properly in order to find his way home, feet tracing over well worn streets paved with sea brine and grey concrete. He only wishes the same could be said about navigating choppy waters.

It'd be far too easy if he made it back to his house unseen, uninterrupted.

"Dream?"

He hastily wipes the back of his sleeve over his eyes, and blinks until the stars solidify into dots rather than wriggling static. When the world stops looking like it's underwater, Dream finds George sitting on the wall across the road, a lit cigarette between his fingers and embers trailing off into the night, miniature floating lanterns. His lips are parted ever so slightly. Around his limbs, a shroud of smoke forms so George is forged of ephemeral shadow rather than peach flesh and crimson plasma. Magenta juts through his hair, starspun silver disappears beneath his neckline, a crumpled twenty sticks out of his jeans.

"George," he says awkwardly. He's mindful of the windows propped open to combat midsummer heat, the unwanted audience he'll draw if his voice is too loud. His house beckons behind him, the key warm in his palm. How simple it would be to hurry through the front garden and slam the door after him, forget about trying to decipher the look in George's eyes. It's impossible to discern. Night clouds part of it, unfamiliarity clouds the rest. Dream is filled with the astute realisation that he doesn't *know* George anymore, because George has grown butterfly wings and Dream has yet to leave his sad little chrysalis.

"How come you're out so late?"

Dream is surprised he's asking.

"How come you are?"

"Smoking," George says, and admittedly, the cigarette between his fingers is self-explanatory.

"You always used to do it indoors."

"Yeah, well. I don't have to sit in my window if I do it out here."

The fucking window. Dream has to bite his lip hard as *it* resurfaces in his mind, the exact thing he's supposed to be running away from because it's too difficult to decode if he stares it right in the face like a goddamn adult.

And it's about to get so much worse, because George is pushing himself off the wall, and the breeze is meandering down the street, and George is crossing over the road, and George is definitely going to piece the jigsaw together in the next ten seconds.

Dream can tell the exact moment George realises he smells of burning driftwood rather than cliffside heather.

His expression muddies for a second, lips tilting down at the corners. Then he's pushing the darkness back under. He gives Dream a smile of light amusement, one eyebrow quirked up as he reaches the stretch of pavement running outside Dream's house. "Was it good sex?"

"Yes," he lies.

It's so obviously a conjecture, and George notices. His smile melts right off his face to leave behind the skeleton of a person he's supposed to know better than himself.

"Are you okay?" he asks. He's looking at Dream's cheeks, at the red rims of his eyes.

"Perfect."

Straight teeth clasp at George's bottom lip. Dream absently wonders what happened to the crooked one. "You're crying, Dream," he says after the silence stretches its limbs out into the darkness and blooms white catchfly. "I can see you are."

"Maybe I don't want you to notice."

George recoils as though he's set his hand down in a nettle patch, palm swelling red with stinging acid. "I didn't mean to point it out. Just...worried."

"It's fine."

More night flower grows in the silence, fertilised and fed with every pull on the cigarette by shining lips, every gaze hurriedly averted, every star as it winks down at them. Silence used to be comforting between them, punctuated by socked feet swinging back and forth, early evening weariness stifled behind balled fists, the white noise emitted by a TV droning on and on in the background. A lot of things have changed. Now they stare at each other like strangers, and all Dream wants to do is poke his fingers right into George's cheeks. He suspects they're not as pillow-y as they used to be.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

George wants to talk to him now. Dream wonders if it would be cruel to laugh.

Instead, he glances at the front door, fiddling with the keyring around his thumb. "Not really."

"Are you sure? We could go to the sea or something, if it helps."

"I want to go to bed."

"You can't sleep when you've been crying."

Dream wonders why George remembers.

"I'll be alright, thank you." Every word comes out measured, as if he's addressing a total stranger. The line of George's jaw is perfectly ordinary, the slope of his collarbones into unblemished skin, the curve of his eyebrows over deep sea irises. Still, Dream can't shake the feeling that he's accidentally stepped into another world where everything resides a little to the left and his best friend's been replaced by a clone.

"No, seriously. Come sit on the beach for a while, I know you like listening to the waves. I'll bring

a bottle.”

“Like when we were kids?” Like when George used to refill vodka bottles with water and pray nobody would notice, when they passed cheap spirits between them and screwed their eyes shut in disgust as it hit the back of their tongues. They numbed to it eventually. Dream remembers throwing up into the sea the first time he was drunk, George’s palm rubbing between his shoulder blades. George seems to be in every memory he has. Perhaps that’s why he’s been feeling like half a soul for the last two years, drifting around grey streets with a gaping hole in the middle of his chest.

George reads his mind. “Yeah, except I won’t have to steal it from mum this time.”

He should say no. He should protect his fragile heart and let himself into the house, toe his shoes off at the bottom of the stairs and collapse face first onto his mattress with tears prickling at seagrass eyes. He should show George what it’s like to be rejected, what it’s like to be ignored.

Ultimately, he misses him too fucking much. Dream will forget everything if it means he can sit by the waves with his head drooping onto George’s shoulder, the moon slumbering above them as the night falls deeper and deeper.

Besides, he can’t sleep when he’s been crying.

So he allows the naive, passionate, beautiful kid nestled somewhere in his heart to win. He’ll wind up on his deathbed if he permits life to turn him bitter.

“Alright.”

The beach is deserted at this time of night, spare for the couple of confused seagulls hopping around on flat feet by the shore. They don’t care about the dark, so Dream thinks he shouldn’t either. It’s easier said than done. George’s skin is moonwashed, his hair and eyes navy, all pieced together by the whim of midnight and set down in the middle of Dream’s life to remind him of how unpretty he is.

Unpretty omega.

Unprettier next to boys made of petals.

Dream follows George dutifully across the rocks onto the beach, counting every russet coloured pebble with laser concentration so he’ll stop thinking about three fingers pushing into a pink rim, lube indiscernible from slick. And it works. He counts twenty three by the time they’re sitting just beyond the point where the rocks begin to darken. Not hair tumbling over a forehead as seaweed drifts in the current, not lips the colour of delicate shell insides parted around noises of pleasure. Just the rocks, steady and grounding.

“Here,” George says, a hand curled around the neck of the bottle. Silver glints in his other palm as he offers it out, the lid already discarded with a rasp of metal against glass.

“What is it?” Dream drinks it anyway. It singes his tongue with chemical sweetness, cheap and nasty but perfect in order to loosen the thick tension strung between them.

“Just vodka.”

“Tastes like vanilla.”

“It *is* vanilla.”

Dream frowns, and lifts the rim to his lips again. One practiced tip of his hand sends more of it lapping at the back of his throat, a little better received now he knows what to expect. Then he’s passing it back to George, looking back out at the sea so he doesn’t have to watch a pale throat bob in a way far too similar to how it does when he fingers himself. “Did you bring this with you? From...there?”

“Mmhmm.”

“What is the city like?”

“Busy. Aren’t we supposed to be talking about you right now?”

So George is determined to keep him shut out. Bringing him down to the beach is a peace offering, Dream supposes, a reluctant reward for his persistence. George doesn’t want to get closer than he has to, even if the sight of Dream blinking back tears had finally cracked him enough to swap saliva on the neck of a vodka bottle at two in the morning.

Persistence is his greatest asset when it comes to George.

“I told you, there’s nothing to talk about. You’re the one who’s been away for two fucking years.”

“Is this an interrogation?”

“Yes.”

“Fine,” George says, eyes narrowed at the waves. “What else do you want to know?”

“Do you live by a road?”

“Everyone does.”

“What’s on your road? They’re all different.”

George turns to look at him now, an eyebrow pushed up in amusement. He seems to realise Dream isn’t going to be content with sitting a metre apart in silence broken by ghosts against glass and the sea lapping a small distance from their feet. “It’s grey,” he says. Even his words sound grey, but not in the same way the English coast is grey. “It’s really not all that special, so I don’t know what you want me to say. The pavement is grey. Sometimes grey people with grey lives walk up and down it, but they’re too busy to notice how washed out they are.”

For some reason, Dream never considered there would be grey people like him in the city. He assumed the streets were paved with gold. He assumed the people would have more to do with themselves than wake up at the grey hour of six o’clock and put on their grey work clothes and walk down grey streets to do their grey jobs. Maybe that’s why George is so bored by him—across

the expanse of an overcast sky, there's nothing to distinguish him from the rest of the rainclouds.

"That's depressing."

"It's true."

"How do you know you're not grey?" Dream desperately wants to know the answer.

The expression on George's face would look nice in a frame, he thinks. A private smile angled at the pebbles, pollinated by honey warmth even as the sea sprays them with sour mist. "There are elms lining the road," he says instead of answering. "And the sun rises directly at one end of the street and sets at the other, like it was made that way. You know, I'm not quite ordinary, Dream. I'm not."

It's because Dream is clinging onto nimble branches that he notices how some of George's words lisp a little. A star flashes in his mouth. He shouldn't be staring so hard at the way George's lips move, but Dream lives in a world of such oppressive grey he sometimes forgets how social undercurrents are supposed to move. So he stares anyway.

"I- George." Curiosity finally gets the better of him. His thoughts run right out of his mind in a rush of sea-bound rivers and reform as words. "Is that a tongue piercing?"

George pauses. Confusion crosses his face for a second before he remembers Dream is often like this, with his interjections about the sun, moon and stars whenever he feels like it. "Oh, yeah." He sticks out his tongue, and there's an orb of glossy silver sitting in the centre of it.

"Why?"

A flash, and his tongue's back in his mouth. Dream just wishes he could package his mind up in the same way, shove it back into his skull so it'll stop conjuring images of George with all his hair stuck to his head and rain sliding over his back.

"For oral."

"Huh?"

"Oral sex, you idiot."

Thankfully Dream isn't drinking when he says it, because he thinks he may have choked. His oxygen becomes stuck to the back of his throat anyway. Then he processes what that really means, and now he's thinking about George's tongue sliding over the red tip of a cock, piercing dipping into the slit every now and again. How it would flash across the length before reaching the knot, eyes clouded by summer storms.

"Oh," he manages to say when he realises he's been quiet for too long. It sounds strangulated. He swallows before continuing, but George is already staring at him with the eyes of a fish far bigger than he's used to, and Dream feels like he's still in his frogspawn stage. "Does it...help?" He cringes as soon as the words are out, clumpy and awkward and so befitting of his small town inexperience.

He can't even stick it out and allow an alpha to fuck him while he's in the middle of a double mattress.

"It's fun. You have to know what you're doing first, or there's not really much point." George drinks from the bottle again, but this time his tongue flattens over the rim to prevent the excess

from dripping down the neck. Metal rasps against glass. Dream looks away so quickly he's surprised he doesn't pull a muscle, and then George is continuing with his piercing clicking against his teeth every now and again. "Speaking of that, weren't you going to tell me what happened earlier?"

The waves crest once, twice, three times before Dream summons the voice into his larynx. "No. Nothing happened."

"Dream, you looked like you were about to *cry*—"

"Why do you care? Did you just come back home so you could laugh at me, is that it? Do you just want to feel better about yourself because you're smart and you're pretty and I'm stuck here with a fiver per hour?" His tongue is doused in vanilla alcohol and it's running away from him. Dream sits under the stars next to the boy he can't get out of his fucking head even when he tries and it feels as if the world has wronged him somehow, handed him the short end of the stick in absolutely every way possible.

"No."

"No?"

"I'm home for a funeral, you ass." The only reason Dream knows George isn't mad is because he's so familiar with him, and his words aren't the same icy cold they'd be if he were really pissed off. "And besides, I would never laugh at you. I just have a feeling you want to talk about it, deep down."

Talk about unsatisfactory sex with George, who looks as if he's been plucked off the front page of a magazine. Dream isn't sure how far he could follow that train of thought. Would he be able to stop? Aphrodite has her hands on those narrow shoulders, and Dream might end up so desperate to win her favour he talks and talks until he's admitting he saw George with three fingers up his ass from across the street. And he's not prepared to admit it fucked with his head, not even to himself. Much less George.

"I'm still looking for *the one*, or whatever the fuck it's supposed to be. Before I get too old and everyone's already mated." As if he's got an expiry date printed on his neck, announcing he'll be too sour to bite before long. It always seems to be omegas painted as spinsters. Never alphas. They always have time, but Dream needs to get his act together before his smile lines are too deep. "Are you..." he trails off, unsure whether he's crossing a line.

"Am I with anyone?"

"Yeah."

The bottle pushes against George's lips, subtle indentations pressing into shining pink. "No. I'm not worried about being mated, though. I'm just living my life at the moment."

Panic sparks between Dream's lungs, a deep rooted dread he's seen plastered across big screens and wheel-out projectors situated in the middle of classrooms. Muttered over breakfast by his parents, scorn lacing their voices. Of the new generation of omegas growing complacent, content to move to the middle of cities and forget all about their purpose in life until it's too late and their minds are withered by opiates. "George, you can't be thinking like that. Don't you want to find an alpha before they're all mated?"

George's throat elongates when he laughs, although it's not cruel. Despite what his turning

stomach tells him, Dream doesn't believe he's being ridiculed at the moment. "No, I don't think so," comes the answer, tossed out as easily as driftwood is passed between the waves.

"What?"

"I said, I'm not interested in being mated to some stupid fucking alpha with a knot bigger than its brain-"

"They're not all like that." The end tips up like a question.

"Maybe not, but I don't care."

"What? Why?" Dream sits on the rocks with the world swimming before him, monosyllabic responses floundering between his lips because he feels an awful lot like a child next to George.

George takes a deep breath.

Then he tips the bottle to his lips. Then again.

Another breath, and he's staring at Dream with terror seeping through his sculpted expression.

"I like omegas."

box dye

Chapter Notes

it's tagged already but i want to warn again for suicide mentions :)

“I like omegas.”

For a moment, the moon stills in the sky, staring down at him with unseeing eyes. Dream is certain he's misunderstood, because this is something for TV, for the news channels his mom rolls her eyes at when she's been watching too long, for novels tucked away into the back of bookstores as though forbidden. George can't be like that. Dream doesn't think that kind of thing is for real people, much less real people who've grown up just across the street from him with a family just like his own.

An alpha parent and an omega parent, just how it's supposed to be. Just how Dream's always been told it's supposed to be.

“Omegas?”

“What do you want me to say? I have sex with omegas. I date them. Instead of alphas.”

George *is* like that.

And now the image haunting Dream is completely different, somehow. George stretching himself open but imagining it's another set of slender fingers, George leaking slick all over his thighs for a cock without a knot at the base, George gasping an omega's name as they lick sweetly into his mouth. George content with temporary lovebites instead of a mating mark, George smelling of vanilla or strawberry or peach or sea heather-

Dream crams that one right back down his throat so it can burn in the acid lining his stomach.

“Oh. That's cool.”

“You're...okay with it?”

Is he?

“I mean, yeah. I guess so.”

Truthfully, he's still having trouble seeing George as one of those people, but he'll be damned if he doesn't at least *try*. He's worried George will realise he likes alphas after all when he reaches full maturity, realise he's fucked up when it's too late to go back and fix it. But George is looking at him with renewed determination, with cold eyes daring Dream to fucking say something, to tell him he's got it all wrong and he ought to stick to fucking alphas.

“You don't seem too sure,” George says.

"I've never really considered it before," he says carefully. George is smart. Dream doesn't think he'd do shit like this so lightly, and he isn't about to throw his best friend to the curb when he's just got him back. "But I know it's nothing to do with me. It's your life. So I'm okay with it."

George stares long and hard at Dream, analysing each centimetre of his face as though he's about to snap on latex gloves and take a scalpel to his cheeks to get a better look at what's going on in his head. "You really don't mind?"

"No," he says, and he sounds more certain this time.

"Thank you." George's shoulders slump. "I've lost friends far less important than you over this."

And that's what Dream's still thinking about when his door shuts behind him an hour later. George's face might've been blank when he said it, might've been filled with burning defiance, but the excess terror spilling out of him afterwards fucking aches. The relief as he realised Dream wasn't going to stand up and walk right off the beach, vowing to never speak to him again. As if everything will be okay. As if it's perfectly fulfilling to live like that, as long as Dream doesn't hate him.

The realisation makes him weak in the knees.

Because in some way, he's still important to George, and George still cares about what he thinks. Just the same as when they were kids.

After that, Dream isn't so sure of where he stands with George. Night loosens the tongue, alcohol loosens it more. He isn't sure whether he's allowed to cross the street and bang his knuckles into the blue wood of George's door, or dial his number, or sit on his desk and wait for George to show up in the window. Maybe George just told him all of...*that* as a mistake. Maybe he didn't want Dream to know after all.

As it happens, he doesn't have to think about it too hard, because George's parents invite him over for dinner. Exactly like they did before George and Dream planted rose bushes in the wasteland stretching between them, thorns dripping with the blood of accidents and leaves curling protectively around pink petals.

The walk there exactly the same, ten paces from his front door to theirs, the resonance of his fist against the wood is exactly the same, the way he leaves his shoes in the entryway is exactly the same, and the set of tableware laid out in perpendicular lines is exactly the same. What isn't exactly the same is the way George refuses to meet his parents' gazes, instead choosing to press his thumb against the handle of his fork until the tip turns white and the joint turns red. Storms brew between them. Behind George's father at the head of the table, the window turns itself into an ice skating rink as the clouds unleash their woes. Silver against ceramic infuses the silence like rain against the conservatory roof.

"Are you seeing anyone at the moment?" George's mom asks when small talk grows tiresome, and

it would be rude if he weren't an omega. It's where his life is heading, with a bite being where it ends so he can go on to nurture someone else's, adoption certificate in hand.

"No," he admits, ashamed.

"That's understandable," she says. "You're not even twenty yet, don't worry. I can't say the same about George." Her eyes flick over to him, his knuckles white against the table.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he says, low and measured.

"Well, I was just wondering if you would see about finding a mate soon. You're not a teenager anymore."

"No, because I don't want a mate," George says, glaring down at his plate. "I like omegas, I've told you this so many times."

"You think you do now, but what about in ten years? When it's too late?"

When everyone is tucked happily away into their happy houses with happy sunflowers sitting out the front. Panic bubbles up Dream's throat, which reshapes itself to mirror a sandglass. Remnants of the beach tip through the neck, each grain counting down the seconds until he's too old and too undesirable to do what he's supposed to.

"It's common to be mated later now," Dream interrupts before George's mom can say something condescending. He looks between them both, awkward because he's an omega and he's not supposed to be interrupting *anyone*, much less when it's mother and child. "Lots of people wait. He has time," he says, wondering why he can't listen to his own words. Why his heart still thrums with terror because he's approaching his twenties too fast and his neck is bare and he hates how alphas handle him like he's made to be thrown away.

George smiles up at him, and the way his parents are staring at Dream with thinly veiled exasperation is worth it.

He's offered dessert and dessert wine to match once the food is gone, and he would accept if George didn't kick him under the table. Hard. So they follow each other up the stairs with mumbled excuses, and in less than a minute later George is closing the door behind him as softly as possible. With the click of the lock, his shoulders drop. Like his puppet strings have been snipped in half.

"Sorry," he says, crossing the room to sit next to Dream on the bed. A foot of space resides between them, a reminder of how friendships change with the weathering of the seasons. "I couldn't stand to be down there any longer than I had to."

"Are they always like that?"

"Yes. I hate it. They invited you over because they think you're gonna be a positive influence on me, or something," George says, and the way he enunciates it makes it sound like an apology. His piercing glints in his mouth, and Dream watches how it flashes when he speaks before remembering conversations require two people to occur.

"Because I like alphas?"

"Yeah. Sort of funny really, because...well, nevermind," George trails off, his fingers knotting in the sheets. When his head drifts back up, Dream swears he's seen an angel. "Listen, I wanted you to come, too. Not just because it'll get them off my case, but because I missed you. And if

spending time with you makes them leave me alone, that's a bonus."

Dream blinks. "You did?"

"Of course I did.

"You're very confusing," Dream admits, tucking his hands under his thighs awkwardly.

"I know. I'm too used to cutting people out of my life—I have to do it to survive." His voice tremors as a stone cast into the shallows, ripples spreading out around it where it skims over the waves before vanishing to the depths for the judgement of Poseidon. "It was awful at the start, when I was still figuring everything out...I became all jaded, tried not to show it though. In case you thought less of me. You understand, right?"

Dream's never had to cut anyone out of his life, but he supposes that makes him privileged. He doesn't have to worry about people protesting his nature or his rights like George does. "Uh, yeah," he lies, heart clenching for George. "I'm sorry you have to deal with that."

"It's not *your* fault."

"I guess not. I can still wish you didn't have to."

George's gaze turns long and serious, and he leans closer as if he's about to tilt his head up and attach their lips. With the press of a needle to his throat, Dream realises he has his lips parted like he's waiting for it, and his chin is tilting downwards as if there's nothing he would do to stop it if George kissed him right here with his petal lips and rose milk cheeks.

Instead, George smiles to himself, and the taut linen stretching between them snaps.

"That means so much to me. More than you know."

To his surprise, they talk in shades of twilight as the streetlamps flick on, about nothing and everything all at once. Words become difficult to pronounce, syllables blended like oil pastel with the gentle thumb of the late hour.

And when George's pillows begin to look more welcoming than they should, Dream decides it's about time he went back to his own window across the street.

George follows him down the stairs and out the door, both of their footsteps silent so his parents won't show up again to bid Dream goodbye. *Come again soon*, they might say, and Dream would have to pretend he didn't know about all their ulterior motives. So they're quiet. It's not an issue, because Dream knows George's stairs almost as well as his own, and he knows which ones scream when he sets his foot down in the middle of them. His shoes are waiting for him at the bottom. The door is waiting for him just beyond that, and the gatepost a little further.

That's where they stop, voices climbing back up to a reasonable level because George's parents are out of earshot once again. George stands in his garden, surrounded by waving ferns and wildflowers, planetary rings stretching around him. And Dream stands in the street, roadkill.

"Goodnight," he says, unsure of what to do with himself.

George chews at his bottom lip for a moment, eyes flicking between Dream's torso and jaw. He's about to ask what's wrong, but there are roses growing at the edges of his vision as George steps forward and wraps his arms around him. The force which implodes in the centre of Dream's head isn't one to be reckoned with. Atomic bomb. George has one hand between his shoulder blades,

and he smells of sweetened alcohol and gardens in the late evening, and his heartbeat is raw and real. Warm skin, steady breathing.

"Goodnight, Dream," he says with a smile. He pulls away, but Dream can still feel the unfamiliarity of his form in his arms. Then he's gone. Only the stars observe him slipping back across the road, a delirious smile spread across the lower half of his face.

Dream is woken by George at the door. Neither of his parents are awake just yet, so he's sent traipsing down the stairs with sleeping sand stuck to his eyes and half a yawn brewing on his tongue, a hand shoving through his hair in an attempt to tame it. It doesn't work. Even he can tell that, if the stray strands of blond cutting across his vision are any sort of indication.

He opens the door and nearly passes out again.

"Are you working today?" George asks. He looks effortlessly stunning even though the sun's barely over the horizon and the sky's still painted with dawn. Damp hair looks good on him. The ends of it are dripping, and he blinks every now and again to clear the residual weariness from dark irises. And it's really not fair. Dream feels like a corpse standing next to him.

"Uh, no. I don't work Saturdays."

"Oh, good. Do you want to go swimming?" George asks, a towel clutched to his chest and a smile pulled wide over his cheeks. Dream wonders how he didn't notice it before, but he supposes he'd been too sidetracked by how wavy George's hair turns when it's wet, how deep his eyes are in early morning light.

George wants to go swimming with him.

George wants to go swimming with him.

"Fuck, yeah, of course," he scrambles, mentally running through the motions to kick his mind back into position. "I was asleep until about five minutes ago. Can I brush my teeth?"

"Mmhmm. I'm not leaving without you, don't worry." George steps over the threshold like he owns the house, shoulders cut lax. "Wow, it's just the same in here as it was before."

"What did you expect to have changed?"

"I don't know. The stairs? They always creaked way more than they should."

Dream's stomach squeezes as he steps onto the stairs. True to George's word, they complain under his weight. "Nah. It's characterful," he says as he climbs the rest of them and rushes into the bathroom to shove a toothbrush into his mouth. He goes faster than he should, heart thumping at the prospect of spending time with George again just like they used to when they were younger. When he's done, he sprints up the half flight of stairs to his room and pulls swimming shorts on

instead of his pyjama bottoms, tightening the drawcord with hyperactive fingers. The bottom drawer rolls open, and he swallows his heat suppressant dry, just like he does every morning. It sticks to his throat.

A glance in the mirror reveals sleepy eyes and dull skin, so he ducks back into the bathroom on his way downstairs to toss water over his face. There's no time to shower. It's a little gross, but he'll stop caring when he has salt crusting his hair and freezing water lapping at his neck.

George is straightening the photos nailed to the wall when he re-emerges two minutes later, water dripping down his cheeks towards his chin. "You changed so much," he says with his fingers steeped at the corner of a frame displaying fifteen year old Dream next to seventeen year old George. They're not smiling—they never did back then. But Dream can pick out the way his eyes glimmer anyway, shining with a soul yet to be broken in like new leather as the world treads all over him. Now he's gone to pieces.

"I did?"

"You're all big now." It's accompanied by glowing cheeks.

Dream shrugs. "Doesn't feel like I've changed. Not compared to you."

"Well you wouldn't notice it yourself, idiot. You get to look in the mirror every day and see each tiny difference as it happens. Anyway. Are you ready now?"

"Yeah." Lethargy is beginning to tip out of his mind, and as his surroundings resharpen Dream finds himself full of golden wonder. Wonder, because George is in his house, George is straightening the pictures on his wall, George is speaking to him, George wants to spend time with him. He feels a little overwhelmed. His heart is fit to burst.

"Okay. We'll go to the cove this time, yeah? There won't be anyone down there."

"If we can get down there without snapping our necks," he says, thinking of the lethal descent down the haphazardly constructed path which winds down the cliff.

"We'll be fine, we've done it hundreds of times."

Dream hums under his breath as he follows George back through the door and onto the street, chest fluttering as he realises pink still clings to the horizon before giving way to clear blue. It'll look so much better in the cove, sectioned off from the rest of the world by green cliffs and haphazard wire fencing. Sand fading into the sea. The sky their only witness, gentle with her rose-tinted gaze.
"Alright."

In all honesty, Dream would've probably agreed to go swimming at Land's End if George had asked.

They make it onto the beach after twenty minutes walking through winding country lanes, heels brushing against stinging nettles every time headlights shine around the corners. The way into the cove is just as dangerous as he remembers, although it's worse for George. George, who hasn't been down here in two years. He utters curses under his breath the entire way down, worsening whenever his foot slips out from underneath him or delicate foliage rips off in his grasp.

"Thank fuck we went on the other beach before," Dream gasps when they're safely on the sand. Just as they'd predicted, the beach is barren. It always is at this time in the morning.

"Well obviously. We would've died trying to get back up there, drunk as fuck," George says, eyeing the path back up to the top of the cliff. It falls away in patchwork sections to leave exposed rock face, and a seabound brook runs over some facets of it to turn the stone dark. Slippery, lethal. Wire fencing twists uselessly against fern, halfway reclaimed by the patient hand of nature.

Dream thinks about climbing back up with wet feet and a sunburnt back, and his energy sweeps out of him. It'll be harder for George. "We still have that to look forward to," he teases.

"God, don't remind me. I must be the first tourist on this beach all year. Don't fuckin' blame them."

"You're not a tourist."

"I kinda feel like it. Feel like a different person."

"You live here, idiot. Your home is still in this town." Because George won't be rid of him that easily, not while he's here with his flesh and bone. Now Dream knows to sink his teeth in and hold tight so that he doesn't lose him again.

George answers by kicking his shoes off, soon followed by his shirt. Too much skin is exposed, and Dream has to pretend to look at the horizon instead of a pale abdomen, narrow shoulders, dark happy trail as soon as the material ends up limp against the cliff erosion. Then he gauds himself, because there's nothing distinct or unusual about George's torso to be fascinated by anyway. "We'll go round the headland, yeah? There's that island thing we can sit on before coming back," George says, oblivious to the white noise bubbling in Dream's head at the same cadence as the stream.

"Only as far as that?" Dream's shirt joins George's.

"I haven't been wild swimming in two years, dickhead. I don't wanna get the coastguard called on me."

"Aww, have your arms grown weak?" Dream asks, reaching forward in a moment of tenacity to squeeze George's bicep. "You'll be fine, I promise."

He dismisses the blush dusting George's cheeks as a result of the brightening sunlight, and steps towards the water. Freezing against his toes, just like always. Colder against his knees when he begins to wade in, each inch numbing his limbs despite the simmering summer heat. George follows close behind with thin arms crossed over his chest as if it'll help stave off the chill, goosebumps erupting over his thighs because he's so unused to stepping into the sea these days. His body's changed, the set of his shoulders all wrong. Dream suspects he needs to hold him in order to reorientate himself and force his world back onto its kilter, but even touching George seems like it might be overstepping some boundary that never existed before.

"Cold," George says. When Dream turns back, he sees him shaking.

"You'll warm up."

"Doesn't feel like it."

With the water embracing his waist, Dream stops. Seaweed tangles around his limbs as if to reclaim them, drag him down to the depths of the sea so he can serve penance for lingering upon things he shouldn't. "Do you want to go home? I don't mind swimming by myself."

"No!" George startles. "I mean...no," he says, softer. "I wanted to spend time with you."

Why is that? Dream wonders as he's inching further into the water. After months of clipped phone calls and silences full of static, George seems brighter than life and cupping a sky full of galaxies to his chest. He's so very different to how he'd been when he first showed up in the town again, and Dream isn't sure what changed.

The answer hits him, and it's obvious. George assumed that he would hate him for liking omegas, and now he knows he doesn't. He knows Dream will love him no matter what, with a determined grin pinned to his face because he just doesn't know how to give up. It's not in his nature. In a decade, the phone will continue to ring on the first day of every month. Dream will make a point of it.

And George is still hesitating with his arms drawn up to his chest like the water is teeming with jellyfish. Dream thinks about empty harbours and emptying bottles of vanilla vodka, and decides he needs a push in the right direction.

"Get in, city boy," Dream says, pressing a flat hand between George's shoulder blades and shoving hard.

Dark hair vanishes into the water. Sea froth bubbles to the top, a white shadow the only thing to denote where he's fallen in. And Dream laughs alongside the sun, caressed by the waves and loved by the person he thought stopped loving him back.

George resurfaces a few seconds later with eyes full of revenge and hands which ache to pull Dream under the surface. He tries. Dream is much bigger than he used to be. "Why won't you fucking fall?" George asks, hair flat against his head and shoulders trembling as water rolls down his shoulders. Sharp fists glance off Dream's chest.

"You're like, a foot shorter than me."

"I'm not," George says, but it doesn't sound as adamant as it used to. If Dream is feeling delirious, he can trick himself into thinking George likes their height difference for whatever reason, but he knows it's stupid. He hated it when they were younger, and it's only grown worse since Dream presented, limbs elongating as if with the express purpose to mark him as unusual.

Abnormal, is the word his mind provides.

Despite George's best efforts, Dream ends up sticking his head underwater exactly when he wants to, and no sooner. It's not so bad. Once his shoulders are in the sea, he doesn't feel as if his limbs are about to ice over and drop off. His chest still heaves under the force of the temperature, but it's a little like dragging fresh air into the catacombs of his lungs and blowing the cobwebs out. Dusting off the grime and the grunge. He breathes more. Salt scours his skin and brine washes his weariness away on the waves, until he begins to feel like there's not an entire universe of difference between him and George. They're treading the same water, after all.

"I'll race you to the island?" Dream asks, arms tensed as he prepares to surge forward and cut through the current.

"That's not fair, you're obviously going to get there first."

"Bye!"

Dream kicks his legs hard and follows the cliffs, eyes burning with salt and muscles burning with tiredness.

The sun is too bright in his eyes, seasick green like marine grass. But he's determined to prove something to George even though they both know his arms are stronger and his legs more toned, so he slices the water with flat hands and squints through his eyelashes. Just around the swell of the land, pointed rocks stick out of the water with white barnacles sharp against the surface, enveloped every few seconds by fresh waves. Dream's arms are beginning to ache, so he swims harder towards it.

He touches the island before George, which isn't surprising. The sun reaches for the sea rolling over his back as soon as he's climbing out of the water, heated hands rubbing along his skin to dry him of salt. His palms sting against sharp ledges. His feet sting more when he's walking up one of the flatter sections to the peak, pressing into a stray limpet in a way that makes his jaw clench.

In the space of seventeen seconds, George gets out of the water. Dream's heart beats faster than it had done when he was swimming. Wet hair strewn across a moonlike forehead, glass beading dripping from his collarbones, lips stretched wide with exhilaration as he gasps hot air into oxygen deprived lungs. "Feel fuckin' alive," he says between each shuddering breath, ascending up the island to sit himself down next to Dream so their knees knock and their elbows collide. He smells of roses cast over the cliffside by a disillusioned lover, the butterfly version of George returned once more to the place his deserted chrysalis lies.

Dream feels like a shipwreck, cast around by stormy skies as he fights to look away from too much exposed skin lest it dredge unwanted memories up from the seabed. His heart breaks his hull in two.

"I feel pretty dead." He laughs, lactic acid pooling in his joints.

"You gotta die to go to heaven."

"Or hell." He seems to be set on reaching it, with the way his mind runs laps ahead of him these days.

"I missed this," George says, beaming with pink cheeks. His arms stretch out behind him to hold his shoulders straight, and his head tips back towards the sky as his chest heaves. "Just like, swimming properly."

"Not in a pool."

"Uhuh. The chlorine makes my eyes hurt."

"And the salt doesn't?" Dream asks, incredulous.

George's head lifts back up, eyes the colour of anemones waiting to slip poison into Dream's bloodstream. "I'm used to saltwater. So are you."

His heart warms. George is used to saltwater and George can still swim even after he's been away for so long. Around him, Dream senses his world beginning to rebuild itself, with the starting point dark eyes full of trust on a darker beach, dark hair falling over the same forehead he's kissed a hundred times before. They're knit back together by the patient hands of fate, and the hole in

Dream's heart starts to dissipate.

"Didn't you ever miss your family?" Dream asks, out of the blue.

A wrinkled nose. "I missed the thought of them," George answers. Dream isn't quite sure how the concept of something and the actuality of it can be divided, since he's spent two years anticipating George's return and now he's been abruptly returned to a state of paradisiacal youth. "I have a different kind of family now, so I never felt too empty."

"Did you miss me?" he blurts.

"More than you realise, I think. But I was scared you would hate me if you knew what I became."

"What did you become?"

"Are you kidding? I like omegas now—"

"But didn't you always? You were always like that, even if you didn't realise it yourself. I never hated you before." Dream can't begin to understand what it must've been like for George, but he's even more lost about why he'd become so distant as the months wore on and the distance between them froze into a thick sheet of ice.

George looks at him long and hard, before his concentration melts right off his face. "I...was. Sorry, I'm sort of amazed you understand it so much. I don't know why I thought you wouldn't," he says, and it's not convincing.

He's about to push more, ask why George stopped trusting him after the summer stuck between the last year of school and the first of university, but George seems to see it coming. He's too good at predicting Dream. He rushes to speak before he can, and when he does, his voice is absent of the frothy deception cresting atop every syllable as if he thinks it'll stop Dream from noticing.

"I wanna go skinny-dipping," George says, with a half-slung smile.

George smiles so much more now. He's grown into his features and he knows it, fingers reaching up to push his hair out of his face because he's well aware of how breathtaking he is. Younger George would've held himself awkwardly on this rock, arms crossed over his chest and chin angled downwards to hide the crooked tooth that used to show when he smiled. This George is nothing like that. He looks at home against the sky, a backdrop of heavenly blue to outline him in heat haze and saltwater pearls rolling over the divots of his lithe skeleton.

And it's just about to get worse. "It's the middle of the day, George." Panic climbs up Dream's throat with venomous claws, poison dripping into his stomach as he realises he'll have to look at even more of George while his mind conjures the sight of him through an attic window. More of his perfect lines and swells, blinding in white sunlight. Moving away has only made George paler, hours once spent barefoot on the beach replaced with endless nights stretching towards sunrise and lomy city streets casting shadow over his cheeks.

"So? There's nobody on the beach. And I'll be in the water, anyway."

"I'm here." The back of his neck glows.

"Why are you so shy all of a sudden? You've seen me naked before."

He has. But all of those times were accidental, and usually ended up with George's eyes widening in surprise, nervous laughter spilling from between his lips as he tried to cover himself up again.

Or, his mind helpfully supplies, when George was in the middle of his bed, ass up, oblivious to how easily Dream could see into his room. And that's why he knows he can't deal with it. Not when his mind is so dead set on betraying him these days, shoving stray thoughts into his periphery to buzz away at his brain like fruit flies. "I haven't seen you at all in two years. It's just not the same."

"What, are you a prude now? Do you want me to cover my ankles like omegas did in the nineteenth century?" George's ankle is thrust into his gaze, taut linen pulled tight over the bone. Upon his shin, dark hair trails towards his thigh, and Dream is filled with the strangest urge to *touch*. He clenches his fists, but his vision is blissfully full of sea and sky once more. Shaky arms push George to his feet. A dark halo is left on the rock where he's been sitting, heather grey tainted dark with seawater all that's left of him as he vanishes somewhere behind Dream.

"What if I just find the sight of your pasty ass unsettling?"

"Oh well." There's a wet slap against the rockface that Dream just knows is due to George's swimming shorts being abandoned, and he only just has enough time to squeeze his eyes shut before George runs past him to dive into the water. Dream drops his forehead onto his knees, wondering what the hell he did to deserve this kind of miserable fate. George is legitimately trying to kill him, he swears.

"Am I gonna be blinded if I open my eyes?" he asks when the sound of dull splashing floats up to his vantage point, but opens them anyway, because he has a fucking deathwish.

George's hair is plastered to his scalp, dark strands sticking out against the pale expanse of his forehead. Shuddering breaths course in and out of him as he attempts to drag oxygen back into his lungs and combat the shock of diving headfirst into the water. His teeth flash in a half-grimace, half-smile. "It's fucking freezing again," he says, teeth chattering between each word.

"That's because you got out to lie in the sun, idiot."

"Dream," George whines, kicking his feet so his head stays afloat. "Get in already."

"Do you want me to freeze?"

"You have to swim back eventually, idiot. Unless you want to start your new life on a tiny rock formation."

"Huh. Maybe I will." Dream closes his eyes and lies flat against the surface of it, ankles crossing over one another as the sun warms his stomach. He's almost dry again, with cool skin to denote where the water's evaporated and the smell of perspiration sticking to his torso. "It's kinda nice. I don't have to go to my shitty job if I stay here."

"You're so dumb," George says. "You can literally just quit your shitty job. Your headline is gonna be like—Florida man found dead on island, or something stupid."

"I lived in Florida for like, five years of my life. I don't qualify."

"Clearly that's all it takes."

"Okay," Dream says, sitting up as white spots dance over his vision. It takes a few seconds for his surroundings to assert themselves, but once they do, he glares down at where George's head sticks out of the water. "I changed my mind. I didn't miss you at all."

"Is what a liar would say."

George is smiling up at him with all his teeth, the sun caught in his hair, his entire bare body supported by the same waves Dream's been listening to for most of his life. He wants to dive off the rock and shove him under the water to prove a point. He wants to dive off the rock and cradle his jaw and fit their mouths together and kiss him so hard they end up sinking into the tide anyway.

"Jesus Christ," he groans, head falling to rest upon his palms. That's not what he wants at all.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just trying to remember why I befriended you in the first place."

"Because I'm pretty and smart and-"

"Shut up," Dream says, because it's easier than agreeing with him.

"Make me."

"What the fuck?" Dream's mind strays back towards the thoughts of pulling George underwater, interlacing their fingers and allowing the sea to swallow them up, glass marbles pouring out of their mouths instead of words.

"Just get back in," George mutters, the tip of his nose and the apexes of his cheeks tainted crimson with the effort of staying afloat. "Or I'll do it for you."

"You couldn't-"

Dream is cut off as George wraps a hand around his ankle and yanks him into the swell, head tipped back as he laughs and laughs and laughs. Ears pink with sunburn, mouth stretched wide and eyes which glitter with constellations even though it's the middle of morning. And he can't even be mad.

He never wants it to end.

The walk back home is accompanied with plentiful swearing as the cliff protests adamantly at their ascent, damp hair and sunburnt napes. His soles grow grubby with dust, the tips of his ears glow red, and his shoes swing by their laces from one hand.

Rather than continuing straight through to the village, they find themselves perched at the tip of the headland with the lane rolling behind them, vacant of mismatched strides and two sets of wet footprints. They talk for long enough the cloud cover returns and shields them from ultraviolet. Perhaps it should be soothing against blistering skin, but the conversation reflects the sky as it floods from blue to grey, from light-hearted to stony in a matter of minutes.

"I don't know what I'm doing with my life," Dream says with a laugh so that it won't sound as real as it feels. "I can't stay in a dead-end job forever. I'll go insane."

"So don't."

"It's not- it's not that easy." Dream will have to wait for his lifeline to be tossed over the side of the ship, orange rope in the form of broad shoulders and a scent of burnt bread or old coffee granules or spilt petrol. Just the thought of it fills him with the strange compulsion to drown instead.

"It's not easy for anyone," George says.

Dream waits, hopeful.

They're sitting besides the cliff face everyone knows isn't possible to jump from into the safe embrace of the sea, unlike the section of the coast with a depth suitable to tombstone off the headland. Against the rockface, foam curdles. Rocks lie in wait beneath the water, too shallow for much of anything. Proven by the way sunlight slices through it as easily as casting aside gossamer curtains and dapples across the bottom, lethal in a way most beautiful things are.

George sits next to him, dressed in barbs.

"I've stood up there," George breathes, his chin tipped towards the cliff. A confession. "I thought it would all be better after. And I was right. It's better now, just not in the way I thought."

It's supposed to shock. Dream is supposed to be unnerved by the thought of George's skull cracked open on the rocks, but he can't bring himself to be upset over it. This George is a very different George to the one he remembers, with a brighter smile and brighter eyes and brighter laughter. And besides-

"I have too." When he left school without a single letter to his name, scent lonely against his neck and narrow blue streets to accompany his desolation. "I stood there, watched the sunset, and realised I only had fifteen days until I could call you again. I went home after that."

"Dream..."

They stare at each other for five seconds before George is pressed up against his chest, fingers clutching at his shirt with the sort of grip that's made to last forever. They're breathing hard, exhilarated to be alive. More exhilarated that they still have each other in one piece despite being dragged along the rocky surface of life, two sets of hands damaged and scarred and bruised and barely healed. George's frame feels smaller than it used to, his head tucked perfectly underneath Dream's chin. He can feel their hearts thrumming in perfect synchronicity. It doesn't matter that George smells of the city, doesn't matter that his face is sharper and his cheeks smaller, because he looks happy, and he's alive.

They're alive.

"Dream." George looks up at him in desperation as Dream's hands splay flat against his back, ghosting up the ridges of his spine. "Promise me you won't go back up there. You can't."

"Why not?" he asks childishly. He's trapped in this town and George isn't, so it's hardly fair of him to make so many demands.

"I can't lose you."

"Then why did you do it to yourself? You left, and that would've been okay if you just fucking spoke to me."

Quiet simmers between them just like it has so many times before, but this time there's not a phone line to disguise the way his bottom lip wobbles. Electricity lines in the breeze, lethal yet forgiving. "There's...something. I can't tell you just now. I'll tell you soon, I promise. You have to trust me."

The last time George promised him something he was standing with one hand on the door of his mom's car, waves of salt rolling off him in apprehension. He was promising Dream he'd be back in no time, sooner than the seasons could change. That never came to fruition.

But he's back now, and he's staring Dream down with the same look he had when he whispered he liked omegas the night before. The waves to soften his words, the rocks to bash them into Dream's skull until he realised it didn't matter to him.

Dream swallows past the rose petals cramming themselves into his throat.

"I trust you."

When they reach the lane that marks the divide between their front doors, Dream feels his heart sink in his chest, waterlogged and in need of a good wringing. This is the point where George disappears into his top floor bedroom in a patchwork house just like Dream's, this is the point where he's left with a hole in his core and sun patterns gliding over his wall to remind him he's wasting his time staring at his ceiling.

George stops outside his house with a grimace, and crosses the road to where Dream is standing. His fingers trail through the anemones sitting atop the garden wall as he watches, confusion etched deep into his forehead. Since arriving back home from the beach, George has transformed. Narrow shoulders curl in on themselves, the corners of his lips tilt down instead of revealing his teeth, and his hands clench into fists with scarlet crescents in their wake. An overcast face, the opposite of the George who'd sat on the island giggling and diving into freezing water with nothing to protect him from the chill.

"I'm using your shower," George announces, one hand resting upon the gatepost.

"Why can't you use your own?"

"My- my mum's home."

Dream thinks back to awkward dinners and emptying wine glasses, sharp glares shot across plates full of soured food. George's eyes stubbornly fixated on the wall instead of his parents, jaw set defensively.

"Dream, please just let me use your shower," George begs when he takes too long to respond, eyes wide and beseeching.

"...okay." Dream can't say no to George when he's muttering to him from a phone box at midnight, much less when he's standing at the edge of his front garden like he's one of the flowers. George's features bloom relief, and he knows he's made the right choice.

After they've discarded their shoes at the bottom of the stairs, George showers first, and Dream sits by his window with his legs crossed. He can hear him humming under his breath. Younger George wouldn't have sung if he knew Dream could hear him, but he's here and he's a half flight of stairs away from Dream with Dream's shower pouring over his skin. His empty room stares back at Dream, mocking his wandering eyes and sinful fascination with George.

George comes back with wet hair, and it's too easy to imagine it's slicked with exertion, too easy to imagine George pressing against him in all the softest places. Dream's soap clinging to his scalp.

Fuck.

"You okay?" George says as he rubs a towel over his head.

Dream kicks his legs hard towards the surface, away from things he doesn't want to think about.

"Yeah. Just zoned out."

"Okay."

Dream stays in the shower for too long, like he's waiting for the water to creep between the folds of his brain and scour every thought of George from his mind. He stares at the plughole whirlpool, hypnotised. By the time the tips of his fingers resemble the texture of wet sand, he's breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth, surrounded by the bite of lemon soap. It doesn't smell like either of them. Dream gets out of the tub with stinging burns and a mind calmer than it was before he got in.

When he opens his door with one hand, rubbing at his hair with the other, it's to find George curled up on the far side of his bed, nose pushed deep into his pillow. His chest rises and dips as steadily as the earth's orbit, peaceful and perfect. As old as time itself.

He stands in the middle of the room for a moment, at a loss as to what to do about the predicament he's unexpectedly found himself in, when George's voice tumbles in sleepy linen lines from somewhere in the pillow.

"Get in, idiot."

Dream tells himself the bubble of pink lemonade sparkling in the centre of his chest is something to do with his inner omega. Something about sleeping close together with those he's most familiar with, surrounding himself with familial scents and warm limbs he knows better than the backs of his own hands. It's his nature. The fluttering at the pit of his stomach can be chalked up to the same thing, he thinks. Monarch butterflies all clamouring for attention, painted in shades of rose and peony as they bat heart shaped wings. And it's because he's happy George is back in his life.

His cheeks burn, and it feels like a lie.

"Are you scared I'm gonna kiss you?" George asks from his bundle of bedsheets.

That sounds nice.

Dream kicks himself very hard, because he doesn't want to kiss George, or hold his hands, or ease the head of his cock between his thighs like his mind keeps suggesting for a reason unbeknownst to him. Dream doesn't even like omegas.

"Well. Are you?"

"No, obviously not. You don't even like omegas," George says, thighs flexing to taunt Dream as he turns onto his back. "...do you?"

"No," Dream says, voice laced with panic. "I mean, no, I don't."

"Chill out, I was only kidding. I don't want to kiss every omega I meet, believe it or not."

"Okay, there's no need to sound so averse to the idea. I'm at least a little bit attractive." *Right?* He's unsure as to why he cares.

"Then why don't you have some knot hanging off your arm, huh?"

"I'm looking for The One, remember?" Dream takes the opportunity to clamber onto the bed beside George, arms entangling with lithe limbs as a result of the cramped mattress. Warm, is all he can think. Warm, with George so very close to him and his smell spilling out onto the covers so Dream might remember this for days to come. Better days, days infused with lamplit hope.

"Damned romantic," George sighs, his gaze fixated upon the star stickers. Dream wonders if he's looking for answers too, and dismisses it as stupid. George doesn't need something as fickle as fate to help him, not when he's doing perfectly alright all by himself.

Pride swells in his chest. Snakes pour between his bones, but he shoves the astute feeling of jealousy far into the distance because it's petty and stupid and he's not sixteen anymore.

"You don't believe in true mates?"

George doesn't scoff at him, remind him he can't be mated with his eyes rolled up like Dream is an imbecile. Instead, he goes quiet for a while. Enough time passes that Dream sees the sun glide a centimetre across the window and fifteen leaves shake free of the oak stood outside his bedroom. Then George's voice resounds, yarrow beneath the pillow. "It'd be selfish of me to say no just because I can't have one. I hope you find yours, Dream. I really do."

The next time Dream lifts his head to look down at George, his lashes are laid over his cheekbones in long grass uniformity, fingers curled into ferns. Holding George is so natural, pressing his nose into his neck and inhaling rose tea is the most familiar thing he's ever done, regardless of whether George's scent has changed or not.

Before he can register the descent, his lids are falling, strength sapped out of his limbs by salt water. He sleeps with a weight on his chest, a boy in his arms. Warmth in his heart.

George's elbow wakes him up later, when the room is brighter and the day older. Dream cracks open an eyelid, feigning sleep. And if George smiles down at him, hand hesitant above the plane of his forehead, before pushing off the bed and pulling the door shut behind him, Dream pretends not to notice.

He's not sure why George's eyes looked so full of despair.

Summer sinks its teeth into the town shortly after that, as if it knows the centre of Dream's world has been put back into place. The roads simmer with relentless heat and the endless stream of tourists brave enough to venture this far into the corner of England infect the streets. Sunset rolls later. Red inflames Dream's skin, a burnt back and burnt arms a result of the heat that ignites the bottom half of the country.

George stops knocking upon his door because Dream knows to stand by his gatepost at seven on the mornings he's not working. Like clockwork. He steps over his threshold as soon as the second hand snaps straight, waits for five minutes until George appears with pillow hair and sleepy eyes. His heart beats faster. They douse themselves in salt water, and Dream begins to feel like less of a sinner.

During the days, at least.

At night, George's pale fingers work their way into his dreams, moon blossoming flowers spilling

across his mind as he imagines a pink tongue in his mouth, gentle and soft in a way alphas aren't. He imagines falling asleep with his head on George's shoulder, on his chest, his abdomen, or pulling him close by the wrists and gliding his nose over the birthmark stamped onto his neck right atop his scent gland. Then he'll suck at it until George is whining, until his hips are canting against Dream's so he can feel all the ways in which he's become more angular.

He wakes with red cheeks and frustration swirling around in his frontal lobe. That's not what he wants at all—he wants to be mated so he won't have to worry about his shitty job and his parents will give him their blessing.

Sand sticks between his sheets, salt sticks to his scalp. He swims and swims and swims until his abdomen tightens and his arms stiffen. George's hands rest against his biceps while they're sleeping through noon, cold fingers curled against red skin like lilies resting atop blood-soaked cemetery soil. George stays later each time, so Dream's sheets smell more of rose than they do of himself.

The middle of the month startles him. Dream sits in the back of the town library after standing on his tiptoes to reach the top shelf, because that's where all the books about gay couples are kept. The end of the month approaches faster than the start of it did.

He reads while the clouds pass him by, and he's only interrupted every few hours whenever someone else remembers the library exists where the land dips next to the town hall. His fingers litter with red papercuts. The books run out before long. He reads every last page with wide eyes, thumbs running over the lines as if to pull them right off the paper and into reality.

When he reaches the end of the quarter-sized shelf, he sits in the back of the tiny arts centre and the watches films where the protagonists kiss in the rain with hair sticking to their foreheads, where they hold tight onto each other's hands, where they sink their teeth into each other's necks right at the end because that's supposed to be the perfect climax to life. It's what everyone wants. Complete with swelling orchestral music and a rainmaker being tossed back and forth so the rain sounds more like plastic pellets than water.

There's never anyone else in front of the projector, and he wonders whether the rest of the people in this town have stopped believing in love. With their unchanging houses and unchanging routines and unchanging mating marks.

It's another Sunday, and he's sitting in the back of the hall with his head resting against the wall and his feet on the chair. A film with Sunday twice in the title rolls on somewhere in the back of his mind, crackling with projection spots every few seconds. He's fiddling with his keys and pretending he's a protagonist too. A broody one, he thinks. One who sits in the back of an arts centre by himself for so long the stars greet him when he emerges, one who swims every morning as the sun is rising with a boy who appears to have escaped from Atlantis.

Until the film captures his attention again, and the keys stop twirling around his thumb.

Omegas, his mind supplies. *Omegas, and they're holding hands, and they're leaning in, and-*

Dream leans forward too, eyes wide.

The film ends with only one of the main characters cradled safely in its arms, heartbeat intact even though their heart is irreparably broken. Dream clutches his chest, holding all of its contents in because there's a cavity where his insides are supposed to be. Tears track down his cheeks. For a moment, he believed they could have a happy ending, live for the rest of their lives with more sunrises than they know what to do with.

Instead, only one of them lived. Two omegas aren't allowed to live happily ever after.

He leaves the arts centre when the projector is dark and the old omega with the sweeping brush begins to glare at him, and the cloud cover obscures the stars. No Venus tonight.

But George is waiting for him in the morning, smile bright and unphased by the tragedy which must surely smite him sooner or later, simply for daring to live like he does. Remnants of the night sky cling to him in the form of his eyes, his hair, his lashes. There are no signs of his crash-landing, no damaged skin or broken ribs. Dream takes him in his arms and holds tight, apologetic and hurting and useless against the water pressure of society.

Somehow, George's bones don't splinter.

The shop Dream works at is grey like the rest of the town, with coarse sand blowing over the threshold whenever the door opens and a permanent layer of grime stuck to the windows to block out the better parts of the sunlight. Aisles feel more labyrinthine in here, with their oppressive steel shelving. Dream can vanish for ten minutes at a time without fearing the bell over the door, because people tend to come here in periodic intervals, exactly the same week by week.

Over the few weeks his heart spends knitting itself back together, George starts to roll in through the glass door with the smell of salt reaching over his shoulders and the smell of candlelit roses spilling from his neck. Dream will roll his eyes every time and say he's being distracting. But he allows George to sit on the counter with his legs crossed, chin jutting into his palm and soft light falling over the planes of his face. And it's on one of those days, where he's trying to ignore the fluttering of his pulse in his neck, that Dream realises he'd follow George into the sun itself.

"This is terrible customer service," George says.

Dream continues to flip through the pages of the magazine laid out on the counter. Glossy colours blur together, the most vibrant thing in his periphery since George tends to disappear behind the shelves. He snorts in disbelief. "There aren't any customers." The bell over the door remains silent.

"Um, hello? I'm here."

Another page. Another spread of people with better lives than his, straight smiles and teeth imprints branded upon their skin. "You're not a customer."

"Yes I am."

"You're not buying anything. You're just being irritating."

The store goes quiet for a while, with only the sounds of George rummaging around the shelves and the distant cries of gulls to pierce the blue haze of afternoon. It's approaching that time of the year which seems liminal, the leadup to the beginning of school and university and the turning of the trees from green to auburn. Except Dream will still be standing here in fall, with his elbows on

the counter and white linoleum for company. George will vanish again, and there won't be anyone to brighten his mantle. Since the thought of it feels an awful lot like stepping off the edge of the cliff into black water, Dream shoves it right out of his head to rot somewhere it can't bother him.

Two boxes land on his magazine. He looks up at George, who looks far too pleased with himself.

"What?"

"I'm buying shit," George says to explain. "Now do your job."

"This is humiliating," Dream says, but picks at the yellow price tabs and transfers the digits to the register with worn fingers and faded keys. Through the monotony of repetition, he barely registers what he's holding until he notices the way George's eyebrows are cocked halfway up his forehead. It's box dye—the remedy to the way the front of George's hair has begun to fade back to its bleach base. "Why'd you need two colours?" he asks, setting a box of magenta and a box of red dye back on the counter.

"One for me. One for you."

Dream's nose crumples. "What? No. I'm not doing that."

"Come on, it'll be fun," George pleads, pushing a tenner and a fiver into Dream's hands and closing his fingers around them. The queen smiles up at him in that disconcerting way she does.

"I'll look stupid." He eyes the red, and realises he's going to spend the next few weeks looking like summer fruit if he allows George anywhere near him. Watermelon rind, oversweet and unwanted. "Like a strawberry."

"Strawberries taste good." George's face wrinkles, regret passing over his features. "Okay, that sounded weird. I didn't mean for it to be weird."

Dream sighs, a drawn-out thing which reaches the catacombs of his chest and dusts out the weariness. For some reason, he can't help but think of the crowd of houses at the top of the cliff, dark windows overlooking the sea with outdated vision and dust fogging up the glass. Dream is a little like that. Falling apart at the edges, held together by iron stitches and rusting nails which threaten to give out whenever the wind changes direction, whenever thoughts of George creep into head and inseminate it with gloating dread. He's thinking of George's hands pushing through his hair when he says, "fine," and the way George's face lights up makes him forget the consequences entirely. "I'm literally gonna look like Ariel. I hate this."

"Ariel is cute."

Dream lifts an eyebrow.

"Okay, shut up. You're making everything so weird," George says, pulling his change towards him and depositing it in his pockets just like he always does. It jingles like the bell. Except the bell isn't jingling at all, because it's not the right time for the teenaged girl who buys a different colour of nail polish every week to appear just yet. "Come over when your shift's done, okay?"

"Fine."

And George is floating back onto the street with his head tipped back in victory, the sun caught in his hair and life flooding across his cheeks. So, so beautiful.

You'll kill me before the cliff ever will, he thinks, before turning the page over to a travel advert for

Bali. As if Dream would ever have the right sort of money to fly that far.

It's evening by the time he gets to George's, who lets him in before he's even had the chance to knock. His fist remains in the air, dropping down his side at the sight of George with his hair damp and water sticking to his neckline.

"I saw you walking up the street," he explains, predicting Dream like always. "Ran down."

"Aw, were you waiting for me?" Dream teases as he kicks his shoes off in the entryway to avoid tracking sand over George's mom's pristine carpets.

He expects George to deny it with a vehement shake of his head and pink cheeks, but instead he just says, "yeah. I was."

Dyeing his hair turns out to be a better idea than he assumed, mostly because he gets to sit on the edge of George's bathtub while he rinses soap out of his hair and waves a dryer around afterwards. Then he's deliberating how much to colour, fiddling with the ends of Dream's hair in a way which tickles his scalp and sends him halfway to delightful sleep. *You're lucky you don't need bleach*, George says somewhere in the fog, his voice the lantern in the middle of misty moors. *Can I just do your whole head? It'll look so good.*

Dream doesn't fully register agreeing to that, but ends up with a head wrapped in saran a while later, vaseline sticky against his forehead and crimson staining the sand colour of his hair. Murder on the beach.

He's watching George fix the fading colour of his hair, tongue stuck out in concentration as he leans closer to the mirror. His shirt is riding up his waist where it's stuck to the bathroom counter, and there's too much skin showing, and Dream wonders if the bruises would match his hair if he were to lean forward and suck hard where his hips lead to his spine.

"Why purple, anyway?" he asks out of curiosity. Or to stop thinking about amethyst bite marks. One or the other.

"No reason," George says, hurried. His eyes flick to Dream in the mirror, and he smiles when they find emerald green gazing right back at him. Soft, even in the yellow light of the overhead lamp.

Dream scoffs. "You always have your reasons." Even if he doesn't like to say what they are.

George is quiet for a moment, but ends up blurting, "heather."

"Huh?"

"It's the colour of heather," he says, louder.

The colour of Dream's scent, purple flowers stretching against blue and releasing indigo so that it might permeate the grey fog settled over the town. But George is looking away with the tips of his cheeks flushed as rose as his changed scent, so Dream pretends he doesn't make the connection. He also pretends he doesn't notice how his own hair is the same colour as George's blush, the same colour as thorned flowers and blood rolling off spiked stems. "It reminds you of home?"

"Yep," George says, jumping aboard that particular excuse as one might reach for a freight train promising the only way to freedom.

"Most people would choose blue for the sea."

"My mum painted the front door blue because of that," George mutters, spitting the words out as if they're overripe. "I'm not like her."

It doesn't matter that the atmosphere sours after that, because they can never spend long together without devolving into fits of giggles about things only they understand. Stupid humour reserved for the pair of them, intact as it was before George left for two years. Gold ripples in all their fault lines. And they're pieced back together as red pours down the plughole, followed by pink and magenta so that a sunset must paint the inside of George's drain.

When they're done, Dream finds a different person in the mirror, one that looks better standing next to George. He's still wearing one of George's biggest shirts, stretched out over years of use to the point it just about fits over his frame, pulled from the very bottom of George's wardrobe. His eyes sting as he realises it still smells a little like George did before he vanished. Salt, sand, swelling tide. The George that died and left this one in his place, louder and brighter and happier and so beautiful Dream feels like he can't ever be close enough to him.

And this George is smiling up at him, laughing, laughing, laughing.

Dream wants to wrap both hands around his waist and run away to the city so they can sit on a rainy balcony together as water pulls the dye out of their hair and into a mess upon the concrete. Dream wants to run away and kiss whipped cream off George's nose and accidentally set fire to tea towels because he's never been a perfect little omega suitable to run a household. Dream wants to run away with his head full of uninvited thoughts and tip them over the edge of suicide-rock so they can die at the bottom. And he wants to settle into the life he's supposed to. With an alpha. And a bite on his neck, and beige food in his stomach, and a house full of cobwebs.

Dream wants to run away with someone who can't give him what he needs to be an entire person in their odd little world, and some secret part of him knows he's fucked.

The rest of him blames it on his hatred of this little town. Of course he would cling to his first out, and his *out* happens to come in the form of George. He wants to run away with George because they're best friends, hold him close so he can't ignore Dream again. And he thinks about having sex with him sometimes, because the human mind doesn't care about staying in its lines when clouded by lust and crowded with curiosity. It doesn't mean anything.

So he allows himself to laugh along with George because despite everything, they're still best friends.

By the time he's walking back up the short length of his garden, he's been absent from the house for over a day and the sun is yearning to disappear behind the cliff once again. The door creaks when he opens it. The climbing ivy over the house number threatens to take his eye out. Everything is just the same as he left it, and he realises with sinking dejection that it'll continue being the same for the next five decades unless he finds a way to get the fuck out of this town.

"What did you do?" is what his mom asks when she sees his hair.

He runs a hand through it, and his world fills up with raspberry as it falls back across his eyes.
“Dyed it,” he says.

“It’s...bright. It’s bright.”

“Yeah. Do you like it?”

Her lips are set in a thin line, muted pink compared to the vivid coral growing from his scalp. “I thought you were looking for a mate.”

“I am?” He’s not sure how his hair has anything to do with it.

“Well, it makes you look a little non-conforming,” she says instead of providing a better explanation. “Like you’re from the city.”

“It’s just red,” he sighs, ducking down so he can squint at himself in the mirror. Stray strands of red fly in every direction the wind blows, tugged with the force of a weathervane spinning wildly in summer breeze. Green eyes beneath the red, prickly stem beneath rose petals. “It’s not like it means anything.” The end seeks for her approval, for assurance that he’s *normal*. Because he is normal. This doesn’t change anything.

“Whatever,” she says as she turns towards the kitchen. He guesses that’s the end of that particular conversation. “Dad’s out tonight. Working,” she says in a tone that suggests he should be relieved. “I have microwave dinner, is that okay?”

Not like Dream has much of a choice. He fusses with his hair, tugging it this way and that until it begins to look less like a skyline on fire and more like morden ruby. “Yeah, ‘s fine.”

They end up in front of the TV like they always do when his dad’s away for work, the usual smell of clementine and sea salt interrupted by the chemicals stewing away next to his scalp. With bland forkful after forkful, Dream finds his mind drifting back to where it always does, as if George is the North to his South and there’s a magnetic field stretching between them. Red and pink, the colour of the sky at sunrise when they swim together and shed their clothes and dance with the water and stare up at the solitary face of suicide cliff. And brush their fingers together, and climb up from the beach with sand stuck to their soles, and stand in the way of cars as they’re walking along the lanes. Like they own the entire town as well as every field surrounding it.

When his mom rolls her eyes at something on the news, Dream tilts his head to one side. “What’s wrong?”

“They want two alphas to be registered as mated. Or two omegas,” she says with a wrinkled nose, as if that’s somehow worse. Perhaps it is. Society revolves around alphas—it’s more thinkable for an alpha to lust after another, because they can bare their pointed canines and scrape along without worrying about relying upon someone else. Their empty necks don’t mean anything, because alphas aren’t the ones forced to carry around marks of ownership. Omegas are nothing. Omegas need alphas.

“But they can’t mate.” Dream turns his gaze back to the TV, confusion crumpling his forehead as he takes in the placards and the pickets which plead for mating equality.

“Exactly. But they want all the same legal benefits as mated couples.”

People like George who want to live their lives just the same as anyone else, regardless of what their necks say. The bottom of his stomach burns as he imagines George holding an omega’s hand, drawing a tattoo machine over where their mating bites are supposed to go, staring at tax returns

under yellow candlelight, sitting in a bubble bath afterwards. It stings, but he shoves it down. Dream sets his jaw and decides George deserves to have all of that, even if he's been told differently his entire life.

"What's wrong with that? It doesn't affect anyone else, does it?"

Acid burns and burns.

His mom sighs, although she looks unsure of herself as she regurgitates the same rhetoric Dream's been listening to his entire life. Like she knows it's right, but she's never been told *why* it's right. "If they were supposed to be mated, they would be able to do it naturally, wouldn't they?"

"Oh." Dream's palms are covered in red crescents. "I guess so."

His dinner makes a reappearance in the sink later that night while perspiration rolls off his temples and his stomach heaves.

Unnatural, his mind sings. Water, it sings next. The water from the tap comes out hot for ages, so boiling against his palms that dry sobs end up echoing from the back of his throat as he wishes and wishes to douse his forehead with coolness. He presses his cheek into the bathroom tile and wishes he would die.

Unnatural, how George dates other omegas, and kisses other omegas, and fucks other omegas. Unnatural, how Dream has developed a strange fixation upon it. He can't stop thinking about George in all sorts of situations, only deterred by the pit of simmering disgust which brews in the pit of his stomach every time it happens. Then guilt, as he realises George deserves his support more than anything.

When all is said and done, Dream realises bending over a porcelain bowl doesn't feel so dissimilar from inviting a faceless alpha between his legs.

glow in the dark stars

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Unease clings to him like sand clings to his clothes, his bedsheets, the folds between his limbs. Not necessarily noticeable, but itchy whenever he moves in a certain way, sits in his window for too long and begins thinking about how unreal the people on the TV are, how real George is. How he's still struggling to join them up with looping pen lines. It itches and itches, drums against his skull and trickles cold water down the back of his neck. Sometimes it brings nausea. Dream shoves it into the depths and sticks his nose into books about proper couples so he can stop thinking about George's lighthouse soul and treacherous secrets.

Come here, his smile says, back home, back home, back home.

Dream had been so entranced, a moth to the sole window with light spilling out of it in the entire town, he neglected to notice his hull splitting in two upon the rocks.

Not anymore. He sits in the arts centre like he always does. Movies about alpha and omega couples blur together, each one indistinguishable from the next. And something about it is comforting. He's being rocked to sleep in his boat atop calm waters, lulled by the blue blanket of water as it ripples around him, secure and safe and sacred. So far away from the beach he can't see the two figures sitting amongst grey pebbles, a glass bottle to send whispers tumbling into the space between them. Whispers profound enough to knock the moon out of orbit and the tides off their schedule.

The lights flick back on, and he realises his mind is miles and miles away. Blank projector, sunset streaming through the blackout blinds as they roll up to allow the sky in. Slices of mandarin fall over his face and become lost within his hair, blood orange in a way that reminds him of his mother and slit throats all at once.

He leaves the hall unsettled. Nobody is around to witness his exit.

It's strangely reminiscent of the night they went to the beach when he reaches home, because George is by his gatepost, and there's a cigarette between his lips, and the smoke looks so perfect against carnation clouds. Perfect, but not as perfect as George. George, with hair curling around his ears and at his nape, pink spread across his lips, a sweater suited to summer nights reaching the middle of his palms, and a hemline skirting his mid-thighs. Dream's eyes are hovering somewhere around his knees when he realises it's not right to stare.

"Hi," he blurts, so different to how they greet each other in the mornings. He's disorientated by dark rooms and reeling projectors, by portrayals of perfect couples far prettier than him. Here George stands, determined to prove beauty isn't reserved for the silver screen. Dream's words tangle in his throat.

"Hello. Were you at the arts centre again?"

"How-"

"Your eyes," George says. "They're all red. Like you're half asleep."

"Oh, yeah. It's pretty late, I guess." He rubs a hand over the back of his neck, gaze caught upon George's clothes draping around his figure as if they're finery rather than cotton.

To his mortification, George is watching him with amused star systems backing his eyes. "How do I look?" He knows exactly what he's doing.

You look fucking stunning, Dream thinks.

"You look nice," is what comes out. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Going to get laid." George says it as if he's reading off the weather forecast. Sunny spells and showers, he says, wrist moving all over the map of Dream's soul with rain clouds in its wake. "Just someone from school, you know? Not like there's much choice in this fucking town." Embers flick from his fingers and die on the pavement. "Everyone's pretty uh, straight-laced. No offence. I've just never had this much trouble finding someone to fuck me."

Ricin seeps into his bloodstream, each pulse of his heart pushing poisonous jealousy through his veins. It burns. Dream doesn't even know why it burns, which makes it burn more. George can get laid if he wants to, George can pull prettier omegas than Dream into his bed and fuck them halfway into next week if he *fucking wants to*.

But a confused fragment of him wishes he were the one wrapped up in ivory sheets, head thrown back as George holds his legs open with a palm on each thigh, fingers slipping downwards to open him up like late spring blossom as he kisses and kisses him in front of an open window—

"Is that...okay?"

The colours lining the street snap back into place. "Sorry, zoned out. Stay safe and all. Don't get pregnant."

That earns him a laugh. He never wants it to end, wants to make George laugh and laugh until the sky stays pink for good. "I'm a male omega, Dream. There won't be anyone getting pregnant."

"Well no, but..."

"I'll stay safe, don't worry," George hums, the soft pad of his ring finger running along his bottom lip to blend the gloss out. "I know that's what you mean."

I'd keep you safe.

The thought stings the back of his throat on its way up, stings more when he shoves it back down. And Dream's still fighting to figure out why he's thinking like this, since he doesn't even like omegas like George.

He likes alphas. Alphas with knots and scents the same as morning coffee and George's lips falling open as he presses against his sweet spot and slick shimmering all over pale thighs-

"Yeah," he croaks, wanting nothing more than to lie down in the road. Cars trundle down it infrequently enough that he'd have to wait ages and ages to die, lying on the tarmac for hours with his lips pursed in frustration. Staring at a sky the colour of failure. Whatever that might be. "Stay safe."

"Thanks, Dream."

George still says his name just the same.

Like it tastes of sugary tea.

Later that night, Dream sees the string lights blink on in George's room, sees the way they illuminate blue sheets and blue blinds pulled halfway over the window. He sees George's lips attached to the neck of a pretty omega, endless eyelashes, shining lips, pink nipples swollen under elegant hands. Rose petals all pieced together. Small and dainty in all the ways he isn't, the pair of them appearing as though they've stepped straight off a movie set and into the real world, ephemeral and better than him. Like he's in the arts centre again, watching the projector. His stomach acid bubbles. He tells himself he needs to find an alpha who'll give him butterflies just how it's supposed to be.

But he's standing in front of his window with his chest fluttering.

Dream doesn't close his blind, because he lives on this fucking street and he shouldn't have to shut out the warm glow of the streetlamp when it's just about the only thing keeping his hearth lit. Instead, he finds himself dropping to his knees and reaching around under his bed, cheek pressed to the floor. After a while, his fingers brush against what he's looking for, and he pulls the torch out from beside a shoebox. Cobwebs trail behind it.

He spends the next few eternities sitting on his bed, eyes tracing over woodchip covered walls with the torch in his hands before he tries to operate it. It doesn't light up, so he pops the end off and allows the pair of double A's to slip into his palm. A shake of the batteries in his fist makes them work once he shoves them back into the torch and refits the plastic casing.

Light flickers against his ceiling, loving and moon-shaped.

The halo slips lower, lower, until it's flashing against the wall by his window whenever he jams his thumb into the button on the handle.

And he presses. And presses.

• • — — • •

The first thing he'd ever learnt to tap out, back when he and George were kids shining torches across at each other to communicate every time they were sent to bed. He would pull his legs onto his desk and press, and press, and wait a couple of seconds for torchlight to fall onto his face from the opposite window.

So he waits just the same, ten years later, with the plastic digging into his chin.

And waits, and waits.

Only the carnelian colour of the streetlamp illuminates the jumble of accumulated belongings shoved into his room. There's no answer from across the lane, but he hadn't been expecting one, not really. George is busy. Busy sinking his teeth into flesh which won't mark and his fingers into hips narrower than Dream's, drawing them into his arms once the sky falls down and the world begins to spin around once more. He's most likely asleep by now. Curled up into his pillow with someone else's arms binding his torso to theirs.

So Dream watches the torch flicker over and over, pushes the switch until what meagre life is left in the batteries runs out. The room falls amber. Later, when the streetlamp ceases to shine, he'll be left alone in the night.

Save my fucking soul, he murmurs, casting the thing onto the floor. It rolls across his carpet before vanishing somewhere under his desk, a beacon shattered and derelict.

He's not sure who he wants to save him. George doesn't seem much like salvation, with the storm

of confusion he drags around behind him. George is the one shoving him off the cliff, lips pushed into the bow that cleaves Dream into blood orange halves. George is the one pulling him into dark caves at sea level, dragging him under the water and kicking his legs hard enough that his feet glance off Dream's shins every now and again.

The insides of his eyelids flash as if illuminated by a lighthouse when he shuts them, and he's remembering, and he's remembering—

Night swings around the globe too fast, and before Dream can remember *what* he's trying to remember, the sun is pulling him right out of bed and setting him down in the middle of this wretched town.

George doesn't come to his house until late afternoon today. With every minute that passes, Dream gets angrier and angrier, until he's pacing around the upstairs landing with his hands in his hair and red tinting his vision. He knows exactly why George is late. Perhaps he'd woken up and climbed between the thighs of the omega from last night again, kissed their lips and fucked them in the morning sunlight.

Perhaps he's still asleep, someone else in his arms.

Either way, Dream works himself into a frenzy as noon passes. One o'clock approaches, and before he knows it, it's three, four, and five.

George rings the doorbell at seven minutes past five, rather than waiting by the front gate and assuming Dream will see him through the window like he normally does. They've started spending time together irregularly, whenever they feel like it, so it's not entirely odd for George to show up at the tail end of the day. But paired with everything else, Dream can't help himself from resenting George a little.

"Hi," he says when he opens the door. His fingers drum against the wood, antsy.

"Hello." George is smiling like always. There's a mark on his neck, but it looks more like a good kick in the stomach. "Would you like to go to the sea?"

He almost tells George to invite the omega from school instead of him. Maybe then he can go for another round on the beach, where the waves mask the sound of moans and the cliffs mask the sight of skin against skin.

But he figures it'll be good for him to get out of the house, since he's bouncing off the walls at this point. Dream thinks if he spends any longer walking around with nothing to occupy him other than his thoughts, he'll be driven mad.

Therefore, he says, “sure,” and they walk towards the coast in silence.

“I feel so good,” George says when they’re nearing the beach, his hair messy around his head and his eyes half lidded. “Feel like I could fly.”

And Dream can’t very well just ignore him, or George would realise something is wrong. “Why?”

“Good sex,” he says, the words matches tossed onto the pile of oil-slicked wood that composes Dream’s mindframe at the moment.

“Huh.”

“What’s the matter, Dream?” George stops in the middle of the path, arms crossed over his chest. It makes the bruise stamped high on his neck all the more prominent, a cheap imitation of what a mating bite is supposed to be. Unnatural, Dream thinks. “You’ve been awfully quiet, all the way down here. Normally you talk and talk, you know.”

The band pulls too tight, and the elastic snaps.

“I can see into your fucking room,” Dream says, eyes flicking to the lovebite beyond his own volition.

“Huh?”

“I can see into your room, George. I can see all the shit you do in there because you leave the light on and- and it’s basically impossible to ignore.”

George’s face remains steady for a moment, before his eyebrows push together and thunder clouds his eyes. “Is that what this is about? You’re okay with me fucking omegas until you realise it’s fucking real and I’m not joking about it? Does it make you fucking uncomfortable?”

“No-”

“Because you know what that makes it sound like?” George says with a laugh coloured black. “It sounds like you’re fucking jealous.”

“I’m not *jealous*,” he says, blood rushing loud in his ears. “Why would I be jealous?”

“I don’t know. Because I have good sex and you don’t? Or maybe,” George says, his tone too dark for Dream’s liking, “maybe, it’s because I know what I want and you don’t. Are you jealous of that, Dream?”

The sky doesn’t look so clear anymore. Dream’s chest rises and falls, rises and falls, and before he knows it, it’s running away from him and his throat is constricting and there’s a pressure squeezing his heart with sharp claws.

In a blur of green, the ground rushes up to meet him, and he sits in the ferns with his vision swimming and his head screaming in denial.

He's not jealous of George.

He knows what he wants.

Doesn't he?

"Dream," George's voice shines through the darkness, angelic now that it's lost its unfamiliar edge. "Dream, I'm sorry, I went too far."

"It's okay," he manages. His voice sounds a hundred miles away. "I shouldn't have been angry in the first place."

He settles deeper into his body, and he can feel George's arm heavy around his shoulders. It pushes him further into the ferns, keeps him grounded like brown eyes and the smell of earthen roses. Cold fingers rub at his skin in gentle circles, over and over and over. He breathes with each one.

"Are you okay to stand?" George asks. "Here, I'll help you. You should get home."

"No."

"No?"

"I want to do...I want to do something to distract me," he says, praying George won't ask what he needs distracting from. He knows he can't go back to his room, caged in brick and mortar to drive himself into a vicious cycle.

Thankfully, George doesn't press. He holds out his hand, and Dream takes it, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet by cool palms and a lazy smile. George keeps holding onto him even once he's standing, gripping tight so he won't topple over.

"What about something scary?" George asks. "Is that a good distraction? I don't know, you're probably not feeling up to it, um—"

"Scary is good." Dream feels like he's got the hiccups—big, awful ones which hurt every time they come up. Except every hiccup is another way he's not supposed to think about George, and no matter how long he stands on his head or holds his breath, they won't go away. He needs something to grab him by the shoulders and yell in his face unexpectedly.

"Scary is the best," George says with a laugh. "If something's not scary, it's hardly worth doing."

George takes him along a path he knows too well, and his brewing suspicions are only confirmed when it leads to the cliff just around the corner from the town. The one cliff divers use because the water is perfectly deep enough to catch them.

The precipice is a short way up the cliff, but it seems like the height of a skyscraper to Dream. Not that he remembers much of what those are like. In front of them, the land bottoms out, and all that's left is the sea, miles and miles of it stretching all the way back to Florida. The prospect of it on the horizon doesn't fill him with any comfort.

"Jump," George says, hair flying in the wind. His cheeks are coloured dark with breeze, eyes blown wide as he steps closer to the edge. Below him, the sea swirls in anticipation. It must be freezing, and the waves are whipping back and forth with the sort of fervour Dream would normally avoid.

But George looks so damn *excited* by it.

"In our clothes?" He thumbs at the hem of his shirt, skeptical. Swimming fully clothed often sounds like a good idea, until he walks up the beach and realises he's twenty minutes away from home and he's started to shake. Teeth chattering, August air deceptively cool. Wet seams rubbing red lines into his thighs.

"Why not? You haven't got anything in your pockets, have you?" George asks, although his hands are already slipping around Dream's waist to pat against the front of his shorts.

Dream's nape warms. "Um, my house key?"

"Just hold onto it."

"I could still lose it-"

"You're still scared of heights," George says through his smile, toes curling over the ledge where the rock drops away into empty air. Even just seeing him standing there is enough to make Dream's stomach turn like the frothing sea foam. "You've done this so many times, you know there's nothing to be afraid of."

"Yeah, I know," he says, arms crossed over his chest.

"You just gotta jump."

He just has to jump, to step forward and pray that George will be there to catch him. There's nobody he'd trust more. But no amount of trust can curb his nausea, erase the type of fear learnt over years of ingraining.

"Come on, hold my hand." George sticks his hand out, wracked with tremors as the clifftop wind grips his fingers.

Dream takes it.

His heart feels too high in his chest. Whether it's due to the precipice jutting before him or George's palm pressed against his, he doesn't want to admit. Not even to himself.

Then George is laughing as he tugs him towards the edge, eyes lit up and feet moving faster, faster. They've done this so many times before, when they were both shorter and George with awkwardness bursting at his seams rather than joyful moonlight. But it's different now. Uncanny valley, so, so, familiar yet ever so slightly wrong.

But there are a lot of things that are supposed to be wrong.

This feels so *right*, as George pulls him off the cliff. Even after being apart for so long, holding onto George with all his trust and half his soul is more natural than breathing.

And then they're falling,

with their fingers damp against each other's palms.

With the sea rushing up to meet them, with the sky watching as he grips George like a lifeboat. He doesn't know if he's screaming in terror or anticipation or exhilaration, but he doesn't have long to ponder upon it, because the sea swallows them whole. Water closes over his head. His screams are muffled by the roaring force of it, left to ring out and out at 52-hertz so that he may be alone

forever.

Dream spent a lot of time swimming when he was younger. He's glad of it now, because he can open his eyes underwater and ignore the burn of the salt. He can look at George's hair, loose around his head as a dark halo might appear, with no rhyme or reason to the directions it chooses to float. George's hand has come loose from his own, and he's surrounded by a school of bubbles, a clamouring of pearls drifting around his limbs and escaping towards the sunset. The pair of them wax and wane, dance in the currents, beam until their cheeks hurt and their eyes are red with brine.

They're insignificant in comparison to the whole of the sea. The thought of it should make him dizzy, but instead he kicks his legs harder towards the surface, revelling in the way the water feels against his skin and how the depths seem to ease away his worldly woes. Weightless. If he had to put a word to it.

"Fuck," he gasps as soon as he's broken the surface to gasp oxygen back into his lungs, too close to the sky again all of a sudden. He can feel it pressing down upon his shoulders, the dim colour of orange blossom filling his vision, heat filling his head. Underwater is silent, peaceful. Up here, the waves are deafening against the cliffs.

"See, it was fine," George says. "I told you it would be fine."

"Never said it wouldn't be."

George stares at him, incredulous. "You're still pale, Dream." Now he's smiling again, as though it's a permanent fixture of his face these days. In fairness, it looks so natural it's difficult to believe he hadn't been born with pink cheeks bunched up and his eyes alight.

"I'm just cold." He shivers for good measure.

"You're unconvincing."

"I'm wounded." His legs protest as he kicks to stay afloat, and he can sense numbness hovering over his head, the guillotine primed to fall and land him dead with lungs full of water. "We shouldn't stay out here," he says between shuddering breaths, "it'll be dark soon. And my arms are gonna fall asleep."

"I don't want to go home," George says, stomach bright in the late sunlight as he floats on his back. Water sticks to his abdomen, trails along each dip and line. Dream's eyes wander of their own accord, and he only notices because the oxygen caught in his throat turns stale with terror after a while.

He coughs. "That's okay. We can stay out a while."

"You'd do that?"

For me? George's eyes seem to plead.

"Yeah, of course."

Within the next few degrees of the sun's descent, they're sitting elbow to elbow in the cove, sand sticking to their soles. Chests heaving with the effort of swimming back to land. Dream's vision blurs around the edges as the light dims, and he thinks it might be because he's not paying so much attention to everything wrong with the horizon.

They dry off in front of a driftwood fire, started by Dream's hands because George never quite

mastered the knack of it. The flames lick at the darkening sky, swirling the stars together. And slowly, slowly, the water rolls off Dream's shoulders and leaves the skin dry, drips out of his hair onto the rocks only to be lost to orange warmth.

"I want to ask you something," George says too fast, the voice of his past seizing his larynx. "It's been on my mind for a while, actually."

"You can ask me anything."

"Yeah- I know. It's just...it's why I was so scared to tell you everything in the first place." Firelight glances off George's brow bone, his head angled downwards as his fingers twist at the ring adorning his left thumb.

"I guess it must be pretty serious," Dream says with an airy laugh added to diffuse the mess of tension stringing between them. It doesn't have the intended effect, since George only looks back up at him with eyes darker than he's ever seen.

The terror is worse now.

"Do you remember the lighthouse?" is what he asks.

Dream's gaze slips to the right of George, over the curve of his shoulder to rest upon the abandoned lighthouse. It's silhouetted against the sky, dreadful and dark and derelict. Gulls flock about by its roof, screaming at each other for a spare inch of tiling to set their webbed feet upon. Even though the lighthouse is painted in flaking white, it appears pitch black due to the late hour, and the thin cloud cover blocking out segments of starlight doesn't help.

He blinks to refocus his vision on reality, and the sound comes rushing back into his ears in a tirade of blood and lapping shallows.

"We used to sleep there," he struggles. He can't help but feel he's stepped into another dimension, fallen right through a mirror to another universe where people have buttons for eyes or sound doesn't function as it usually would. "We used to pick the lock and sleep at the top because nobody would bother us up there."

"Yeah. What else?"

"Um..." Dream trails off, unsure why George is looking at him as though he's holding the world together with his bare hands and his palms have started to slip. "Is there something I'm forgetting?"

"What about when you kissed me, Dream?"

He blinks.

The art of dredging memories back up from the bottom of the sea is evasive, tiresome, but not impossible. They tend to come floating back up with their words bent out of order and the typeface running down the pages, but comprehensible nevertheless. Unless prompted by something, Dream suspects they'd be left for all of eternity to bleed dark ink into salt water. Prompts are fishing wire and sharp hooks, uncomfortable against the bed cushioning every lost page as they scrape along his skull. The prompt is not often wanted. But it comes anyway. Men in fishing boats suck air into their lungs rather than murky water, and perhaps that's what makes them so much better than the organisms stuck in the depths.

What about when you kissed me, Dream?

Iron pierces through the mouth of the analogous memory, metallic and red and violent.

Gentle lips, hesitant touches, sky tossed into a frenzy. Dream knows what he was trying to remember the night he tapped out silent pleas for help with a less-than-lantern, fingers clutching at a lump of plastic like it would contain the answer he wanted. He was trying to remember *this*, wasn't he? Although the letters are still rearranging themselves, and he's reeling from the realisation that all the desire in his mind exists alongside a semblance of reality. He assumed it was something he dreamt.

But he can't admit any of that, so he lies for a while longer. Perhaps it will soften the impact when it inevitably arrives.

"I what?"

"You kissed me. And it was dumb, we were both fucking drunk and it wasn't like it meant anything. But- God, I don't know what I was thinking- I let it happen for too long."

"And then?" he prompts, terrified of the answer.

George's shoulders slump. "You laughed at me. And after that I was convinced I couldn't tell you about everything going on in my head, because you clearly thought it wasn't right."

"The uh, omega stuff?" Dream asks. He feels like he'll break if George doesn't clarify.

"Yes," George answers, fast. "The omega stuff."

Dream casts his mind back, throws his line out into dark waters, and fishes around for something that'll help him shake the alcohol free of that particular memory. He knows which night George is talking about, the one right before he left for university. It was raining. Rain driving against the lighthouse keeper windows, a leaking pane the best thing they had to shelter themselves besides each other's cold arms. Lightning divided the sky every few minutes, dousing the room with light to illuminate the depleting bottle of alcohol placed between them.

When the level dipped halfway down the glass, Dream's recollection of that night started to bleed in the rain, chalk against the wall. He laughed louder, leaned closer, played with George's fingers to watch his cheeks flare up. *Oh come on*, he blearily recalls saying, *I'm just an omega. Why are you so flustered?*

You're trying to hold my hands, George said, words weather-worn with the passage of time and muddied by spirits.

And much like sand blowing off an artifact, the rest of it is unearthed. The details are worn and eroded, but Dream can still make out the shape of the thing, prod at its surface with gloved hands and determine it as something precious. *Why* it's seated so close to his heart, he's not so sure.

"*I could do more*," he remembers murmuring. It made it worse. Murmurs were reserved for late-night honesty, when he wasn't putting up so much of a front and didn't feel the need to dress his voice in volume to drown out everything so very wrong with him.

George's lips parted, curious. "*Like what?*"

"*What if I kissed you?*" he said, tongue flicking around the glass rim of the bottle. It stung his lips, turned his tongue sour. "*Just to try it.*"

"*You want to kiss me?*"

Dream raised his hands in defence. "Hey, we're both omegas, it's not like it means anything. It'll be stupid."

The thoughtful press of George's lips could be passed off as exasperation, but that hypothesis didn't particularly match the way he nodded after a short while. Defiance burned in his eyes, and Dream thought George's scent would be coffee, like the brown of his irises, if he were born an alpha. Perhaps then they could kiss for real. George was leaning forward again, hands splayed flat against the boards so they creaked under his slight weight. "Go on. I bet you won't."

But Dream spent his childhood jumping from the cliffs even when he didn't want to, so he wasn't about to turn down a dare. It wasn't as if it would mean anything.

So he leant forward in one smooth motion, and pressed their lips together.

Kissing George wasn't the worst thing he'd ever done. It wasn't as bad as the time an alpha shoved his tongue into Dream's mouth during year eleven prom, or faking his way through the awkward relationship that followed it. Kissing George was just that—his lips weren't hot and abrasive against his own, his hands didn't wander places he didn't want them to, and his senses weren't overwhelmed by the smell of wet coffee granules. Instead, Dream was floating in the middle of the sea on his back, salt rolling over him. Furthermore, kissing George was reserved for the top floor of the lighthouse, where nobody could see what they were doing. Clouds pushed against the window to create a thick veil, and it didn't matter that his lungs were beginning to burn, because to Dream, it didn't seem so real. Imaginary, dreamlike.

So that was why they started to kiss harder, with too much tongue and fingers reaching up into soft hair. It wasn't real, it wasn't real, it wasn't real.

The moment it went too far coincided with when they began to sigh against each other, lips opening in order for their tongues to slide together. Much more than a gentle press of cupid's bow to cupid's bow.

George tasted exactly as he would expect an omega to taste, something sweet shrouded by layers and layers of sea salt.

They broke apart. Their hands trembled and their chests heaved as though they'd just jumped off the cliff into deep water, fire wrapping around their ribs as their blood screamed for oxygen. George's eyes were wide, totally eclipsed by his pupils.

It came crashing down around Dream all at once. Even with his surroundings tipping about as though he were aboard the Titanic, he could taste the panic as it forced its way up his throat and spread bile over his tongue. The realisation that he'd kissed George like a lover would, with the same butterfly wing lightness that was supposed to be reserved for something special enough to be protected at all costs. That was how he would kiss a mate.

And the words *in vino veritas* were scrolling across his mind with alarming coherency.

Rather than dive in headfirst, Dream laughed in a moment of cognitive dissonance. It was the easiest thing to do. It was also the fastest way to crush George's windpipe with his bare fist and allow the blood to run over his knuckles, but that placid expression of his never gave anything away. Dark eyes, iced over with nonchalance. George just watched him laugh, confident he didn't need to join in because Dream wouldn't remember any of it so well come morning.

"I didn't mean it like that," he says. His palm rubs over the arch of his foot, thumb pressing into the base of his toes to work out the ache rooted in the joint. "I was drunk."

George sighs. "Yeah, I know."

He doesn't say anything else, and the silence stretches on with the pulsing of the waves to rouse them into gentle uncertainty. Pressure constricts around Dream's throat, the need to over explain everything like a guilty suspect confronted by an interrogation room. Except he'd much rather be coughing up the truth to a tape. George is too warm, too alive.

"I...I forgot it happened."

An eyebrow quirks up. "Really?"

"I mean, it was there somewhere. But I wanted to forget, so I did. Alcohol helps with that, I think."

"You wanted to forget." George is drawing dejected patterns in the sand, long fingers looping around to spell out letters and diagrams. It takes a moment for the set of his shoulders to sink in, the slump of his spine and the furrow of his brow.

Dream can't tell him about the whirlpool of panic he'd started to drown in once George kissed him, the real reason he'd shoved it so far out of his mind. So he goes along with it. "Yeah. Like you said, it wasn't like it was a big deal or anything. I didn't have much of a reason to remember."

"Of course- I-" George stops himself, blinking once, twice, before looking at Dream with a stare steadier than before. "That makes sense."

Nothing makes sense anymore, he wishes to scream. *Save me.*

"I'm sorry, really. Knowing what I do now, I wouldn't do it like that."

"You wouldn't do it at all."

"No," he says, as shaky as his legs standing at the cliff edge. "I wouldn't."

George's head lands on his shoulder, and he thinks it's a peace offering. They'll be alright.

It's impossible for the night to grow darker, but they watch the stars as they soar overhead, and the satellites as they blink in mere imitation of the planets. George knows where all the constellations are, and so does Dream, but he allows George to point them out because he loves how his voice sounds when he does it. Pitched downwards, tender. As if he's cupping starlets in his palms, breathing life over them as he names each one. With every name, the flames grow shorter and the night later, until they're left shivering against each other in front of a glowing pile of embers. Charred driftwood marks the closing of the day better than uncouth words ever could, so they struggle to their feet in silent agreement.

When they leave the beach, the breeze reaches its hands out to blow the lines in the sand away. A blank slate is left behind for tomorrow.

The week draws to a close, and Dream is hard. He's staring up at his star-ceiling with his stomach sinking as he strains against his sweats, a dull ache settling into the base of his stomach. Evening approaches. All he wants to do is sleep.

It's been happening more and more often recently, and if he really thinks about it, he can match it up with the night he'd seen George splitting himself open on three fingers. Understandably, he doesn't like thinking about it at all. He feels several years younger than he is again, back when everything made him strain against his boxers and kissing George was the first image he yanked into his mind to make it go away. It never worked. He never thought too much about why.

In all honesty, Dream's known for ages something isn't quite right with him. But he'd dismissed it as temporary—he'd grow into his body one day, and he'd go into heat whenever nature came knocking at his door, and he'd have a shadowy alpha in his bed to help. That's what he told himself, at least. Liking other omegas was for people on the TV after watershed. Vulgar, separated from his perfect world. Until George walked back into his life with a tongue piercing and shirts which hugged his shoulders and easy smiles and a laugh Dream never ever wanted to hear die. Delicate omegas in his bed, eyes rolled up in their skulls as he fucks them how they deserve.

That could be him, a nagging voice in the back of his mind says. He could be between those sheets, thighs trembling as he allows himself to be taken apart by another omega despite everything he's told himself.

He's harder now.

His hands rub over his face, and he muffles a scream in his pillow.

Dream is grasping at straws at this point, fumbling around in the dark for anything that'll prove to himself he's normal, he's not like George, he can still find the alpha who'll make him feel like an entire person again.

So he casts his line himself this time, determined to see things without water blurring the lines. This is what he finds with his fishing line:

The Sex-Ed classes. They'd been alright when he was a kid, because they were all too young to really understand much beyond the biological concept of it.

It was fun to watch the poorly concealed horror crossing his classmates' faces, even better when someone couldn't hold back their laughter anymore and had to stay inside during recess. Dream almost felt sorry for them. But the pity evaporated as soon as he was outside, knees stained green and sunburn creeping up the back of his neck. He didn't think about the class again, content to turn his mouth calippo orange.

It wasn't so fun when his limbs began to stretch, when his jaw sharpened and he became the tallest person in his family. When he presented as an omega, he soon grew tired of relatives he barely knew congratulating him. He wasn't sure why they were so elated. He didn't even do anything. Every time it happened, he smiled into the phone receiver for as long as he could bear, before slipping upstairs to collapse on his twin bed and gaze at the glow in the dark stars he still had stuck to his ceiling from when he was in primary school. They didn't seem so comforting anymore.

He wished they were real, because maybe then they would provide some answers.

Of course, the classes came back to haunt him, only this time he'd be put in a room full of omegas, plastic chair sticking to his thighs as the sun fell over his face. His fingers traced the ink on his desk as something to do. The teacher standing at the front of the room seemed to drone on and on, equipped with explanations of knots and mating marks, diagrams chalked over the blackboard enough to sting the back of his throat with nausea.

"You alright?" His classmate leaned over to him, voice pitched down to a whisper.

He realised his nose was wrinkled, and hastily pulled an expression of nonchalance back over his features. "Well, it's just kinda weird, isn't it?" he tried, expecting their face to split into a quiet smile of agreement. Just like it had when he was younger.

Only it didn't.

"Not really," they said, eyebrows pushed together. "It's pretty normal, actually. Don't you want an alpha to mate you?" The words grew a little whimsical towards the end of the question, spun out of iridescent sugar glass to glitter in the afternoon light, promising a future full of sweet security. As though there was nothing better in all the world.

"Oh, yeah," he said, stomach acid roiling in tides of gasoline. "I was only kidding."

Then he went to lunch, and George laughed with him about knots. He always did.

George had an uncanny way of making him feel normal again.

"Holy fuck," he mutters, sitting up so he can't see the stars anymore. He never considered there was a reason George was the only person who seemed to make sense in that damned school, with their private smiles and arms brushing due to their proximity. George always made sense because he didn't like alphas, and Dream didn't like alphas-

Dream likes alphas.

He pulls at his hair until the roots hurt, frustration tears clinging to his eyelashes as he tries and tries to envision himself underneath an alpha. Knot pressing against his rim, sharp teeth ghosting over his neck. The thought of it makes his stomach turn. He presses a hand over his mouth and stares at the window in panic, wishing it was late enough for the real stars to peek out of their daytime veil and illuminate the way back to safety.

But he's faced with a blue sky, and he doesn't know what to do.

Blue sky, blue sea, blue for the colour of George's door—

"Get out of my fucking head," he begs. Ever so cruel, the way he wished for George's return as if his life depended upon it when he was safely tucked away into a place that liked him a little better. Now he's back, and he's everywhere, and it's too much. And Dream can't stop thinking about him in ways he really shouldn't, dangerous ways which make his washing machine stomach clatter like he's left a fucking wrench in the middle of it and now his world's inverting itself and he doesn't have a goddamn clue how to fix it and-

And.

And Dream is willing images of perfect alphas into his head as he sticks a hand past his waistband and tugs his cock free because he's going to get off so he can stop thinking about George's fingers

in his mouth. He's going to prove to himself he's not broken. Even as he thinks it, as he thinks of shattered mirrors spelling out misfortune, guilt seeps into the back of his mind. George isn't broken. George is more beautiful than he's ever been before, so why would Dream be broken if he's just the same?

And the answer lies in the stack of abandoned notes under his desk gathering dust, the mock exam papers with red crosses all over them. George can survive by himself, George can do whatever the fuck he likes with his life and achieve whatever the fuck he wants, and Dream can't. He doesn't even know how to begin.

He spits into his palm and tugs at himself, waiting for anything about over-sculpted chests and the smell of gasoline to become appealing. Petrol smells good to some, doesn't it? A gasp escapes him as his thumb rubs over the head of his cock. Coffee in the morning smells good, smells of Mondays and Tuesdays when the week is still fresh and everything is in its right place.

Dream hates breakfast time.

After a while of fruitlessly trying to get himself off, the desperation sets in. And when desperation sets in, it's difficult for him to sort right from wrong, up from down, what he wants from what he's been told he wants.

He barely notices that he's thinking about George until he cumms all over his fist and the stars swim out of focus. The last thing on his mind was George opening himself up upon pale fingers, George begging Dream to grasp his hips and come closer, come impossibly nearer to him in order to make up for so much time spent apart. Rose tints his vision. Bitter irony taints his tongue.

It's not until he's cleaning himself off that the shame sets in, the clarity which tends to strike once all is said and done. The smile falls off his face.

Dream likes alphas. He likes the idea of being mated. He likes the idea of pushing his fingers into hands broader than his own and squeezing hard, comforted that he's found the perfect life with someone who doesn't care how wide his shoulders are because his scent and his slick make up for it. He likes the idea of adopting children just how it's supposed to be, and he likes the idea of security in a world which seems so hell-bent on making him miserable. He doesn't have to amount to anything, if he can just find someone who makes him giddy.

But he tries to imagine himself being carried over the threshold, or with a mating mark attached to his neck, or shopping for groceries with tiny hands clinging to the cart, and he just can't do it. His fantasies merge into a faceless omega every time he tries, and the alpha begins to look more and more like rose petal lips and catchfly fingers. Until they're undeniably George. And now all his fantasies he's tried so hard to cultivate are ruined, because he's thinking about growing old with his best friend, about layering bruises over his neck since they can't mate properly, about scenting him with his cheeks blazing in shades of shame because they're not supposed to smell so strongly of each other but they want to anyway. He's imagining George, and he doesn't even like omegas.

And he realises he may have a problem larger than he knows how to deal with.

Over the next few days, the heat plaguing the village sharpens to be unbearable. Dream avoids leaving the house as much as he can, since he ends up slick with perspiration every time he's under the sun for more than a few minutes. Breathing is difficult. The air is thick with summer, and it feels as if hell will never end.

Besides, it gives him an excuse to stay away from George while he attempts to sort through his thoughts. They don't go swimming. They agree that the heat is too oppressive to walk down to the beach, and the ascent back up the cliff would be madness. Red sunburn would ignite their skin. So it's easy for them to agree to put the bookmark in that particular book of ideas, and they stop seeing each other every morning.

Dream hates it.

Dream is grateful for it.

Each night, he turns the torch over in his hands, pressing the button in the same pattern even though the batteries are flat. Three dots, three dashes, three dots. All he wants is to be saved by the rescue helicopter. It could pluck him off the earth and whisk him to safety no problem, but he's left to starve on his tiny island.

Night after night, he falls asleep with the covers kicked all the way off, skin shining with sweat. He wakes up uncomfortable, burning more than ever with unwelcome stiffness in his boxers. The heat is eroding some part of his mind, he knows. Soon he won't be able to bear it.

The weather breaks on a Saturday. Dream wakes up to the sound of rain singing against his window, and wishes he could be pushed along the gutter and left to rot in the drain.

There's something baptismal about rain. The sea evaporates, and when it reforms as angel white clouds, the salt is left behind. Then it falls onto the town and washes out the cobwebs, collects the dust off the streets and flows right back along the river beds to where it started. Birth, rebirth. It's raining today, and Dream would like to stop biting the inside of his cheek every time George pops into his mind.

It's raining today, so he'll earmark this day in his year and change afterwards.

He finds himself walking through the streets, tossed from road to road in a monotonous blur of grey. Even though the houses block out the sea, he can hear it falling over itself in an attempt to climb up the beach and retake the town. Every time it gets too close, the moon will pull it back. Without the moon, perhaps the village would've been washed away a long time ago, the houses

lining the cliff reduced to loose nails and floorboards. A plethora of lost junk.

Kind of like Dream.

His house appears in the middle of the mist once more, looming tall and imposing despite its stout height. He stops in front of it. Really, he should go back inside, kick off his shoes in the entryway and put his jeans on the radiator to turn them stiff. He's walked around the entire town, past the row of vendors selling plastic shells, the spire of the church, the lifeboat station taunting him with its navy roof. Now he's back among the anemones, and he should go inside and sip breakfast tea and pull warm socks on and spend his time trying not to think of George in a sexual way because the rain hasn't actually helped at all and he really wished it would.

Instead, he continues up the street, avoiding the puddles pooling in the uneven paving stones. Dream doesn't know where he's going, but he supposes the rain doesn't either. Rain doesn't have a thought process. It just exists. He wants to be more like rain, cleansing and wild and untethered by any nation. His feet carry him instead of his mind. The passing of half dilapidated houses becomes background noise.

This is how Dream ends up walking beyond the boundary of the town. The line where the road starts belonging to the countryside instead of the village and wild ferns keep him company instead of curb-side bins. He looks down at his forearm, expecting to see a mark branding him as different. But there is nothing.

Soon enough, he's looking out over the sea again, vision unhindered by houses all lined up like chalk pastels in the box. Nothing about it has changed. He keeps walking, hoping and praying and begging he'll come across a section of cliff more eroded than it had been before. Sections of grass tumbling all the way down to the beach, debris filling up the cove with a larger version of the worthless stone collection he keeps on his windowsill. Grey, all of them. Special at one moment in time, but not special enough for him to remember why.

Dream keeps walking, and he reaches the phone box stuck on the side of the road. A gravestone of human intervention. Graffiti sprawls across the glass. The receiver hangs loose of the phone, plastic brushing against the floor as the hold tone presumably rings out for nobody's ears.

Beyond the phone box, the lighthouse sticks out of the haze. It stands at the edge of the land, joined to him by the road stretching all the way to its door. The windows are dark and the exterior spectral, walls painted white with grey stains running up to the beacon. If Dream squints, he can see the clouds as ghosts instead. Something died in that lighthouse. Something yellow with youth and blue with christened innocence died in that room, waiting for resurrection.

He wants to stop biting the inside of his cheek every time he thinks of George in a sexual way. The skin is too soft. It'll scar after a while. If George continues to appear at the edge of his thoughts whenever he closes his eyes for too long, he'll end up disfigured.

Dream opens the phone box, steps inside, and pushes coins into the machine with shaking fingers. Ammonia, is how it smells. Shredded grass litters the floor, and there's a newspaper shoved in the corner. Wet pages, running ink. He's dialling now. The receiver is cold against his ear, and the wind howls around his glass box, and the dial tone sounds different than the one at home.

And it ends.

"George," he says, because there's nobody else he wants to talk to. "George, it's me."

"Dream?" Milk tea. "Why do you sound so...are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just cold." Water slicks his hair to his neck, his forehead, his ears. The tip of his nose burns red in his periphery.

"Where are you?" George asks. His voice presses faster, concern lacing every question. It makes Dream's heart squeeze as he imagines George sitting with his legs crossed upon his blankets, the phone cradled in his lap as his brows draw together. He might be looking out of his window at Dream's, worry filling his frown lines as he realises the light isn't on.

"Phone box. It's raining."

"No shit. I'm in the village, idiot. The weather is the same for us now."

Dream's heart squeezes, unfettered by the rain for a moment.

He's scared to ask what's coming next. It'll make it real, seal him in the grave so he has no choice but to deal with the consequences. But he's made it this far, and the isolation lulls him into believing he's the only person in the world. He wants to eat it whole. "Are you busy right now?"

"I'm not doing anything," George says. He sounds warm. He sounds like a crackling driftwood fire, the sort that casts its light out over the beach and prevents it from seeming like a wasteland at the edge of the universe. "Why? What did you want to do? I'm not going in the sea when the weather's like this, it's too dangerous-"

"Come to the lighthouse," he rushes, rain sliding over the window panes faster than it slides over his cheeks.

"The lighthouse...Dream, are you trying to mess with me?"

"No, I promise. It's important."

"What is it-"

The automated voice instructs him to push more coins into the machine, and he empties the rest of his pennies into it. "I'm going to the lighthouse. Please come. *Please.*"

The line cuts off.

Rain welcomes him back into its embrace and the clouds darken. Dream looks between the lighthouse, the town, the lighthouse, the town. The town is lost to the rain, claimed by the heavens upending over it, but the lighthouse stands its ground where it's constructed at the end of the land overlooking the sea.

Fuck, he hopes George'll come. He can't walk back into mundane Eden now, where he's supposed to be usual just like everyone else and have an alpha mate him. He can't walk back, disgraced.

He turns his back, and continues along the road by himself.

There aren't many ways to pass the time in the lighthouse. Many of them require the imagination of someone less weary than he is, so he opts to sit against the wall and stare at the storm as it gears up to light the sky with jagged bolts of electricity.

Just like last time.

Nobody's been in here since then.

He avoids the side of the room *it* happened, because sitting there would feel akin to getting into someone's deathbed. There are blankets spread out beneath him, left here and never returned to the linen cupboard in his house. The knit is fraying. Threads fly loose, and he picks at them instead of his cuticles. After a while, Dream begins to count the rows of purl stitch, twenty for each rectangle, thirty across. He likes it when things are even like that. There are one hundred and three steps into this room, and that's not divisible by anything. Maybe if it was, it would be easier to work out everything that happened in this lighthouse, package it up with neat ribbons.

"Are you counting again?"

Dream jumps halfway to Mercury.

"Fuck, George," he says, running a hand through his hair. His temperament is holding onto the cliff edge by its fingernails, and the appearance of George at the top of the stairs like an apparition doesn't help him maintain his composure. "Why'd you have to creep up on me like that?"

George shrugs. "Don't know. Why did you want me to come here?"

"Just wanted to talk," he says, fingernails running along the rows of even stitching so that his heartbeat might match.

"It must be something important."

"Maybe."

"You wouldn't have asked me to come all the way here if it wasn't important, Dream." George crosses the room from where he's standing by the stairs, and comes to a halt at the edge of the blankets. His feet stay on the boards, so he's separate from Dream. Dream wants their worlds to collide for a moment, for as long as George will allow it. He wants to pull him close and press their hearts together, accept the fact that they beat just the same despite all the differences between them.

"Sit down," he says in that tone he tends to adopt when he's panicking. It's the one he uses at awkward dinners, at watersheds when he's sitting next to his mom and she's picking apart the way George ran off to the city.

George sits down. Dream pulls him closer. Their knees touch, and he can assign every one of George's freckles to the stars adorning the sky above their village. He wonders if George would like to listen to his voice as he does it.

"Dream," George begins. Their fingers are close enough for him to reach out and touch. He looks up at Dream in earnest. "It's raining just like before. Why did you want me to come here?"

The words almost spill right out of him, coaxed forth by the ghost of alcohol softening his tongue. Right at the last moment, he changes his mind, determined to cling onto the precipice for a while

longer before he falls into the water. Allow George to jump first, so it's not as intimidating for him to follow. That's what he always does. Mimic George, because there's something so effortlessly beautiful about him.

How did you know you like omegas? is what Dream wants to ask.

Instead, he asks the question which stings more.

"Why did you stay away for so fucking long, Georgie?"

"You say my name like it's made of petals," George says straight away. "I'm not delicate just because I'm an omega, Dream. I'm not going to break if you ask me things like that."

"I never said you were delicate."

"You look at me like I'll float away."

Dream's fingers are a hair's breadth away from George's, the breadcrumb trail leading right back to where they ventured two years ago. "You did. You left for two fucking years, George—" this time he ensures to spit the syllables as though dripping with rose perfume—"and now I'm asking why you never came back. Not until you absolutely had to."

"Well, my parents aren't too enthusiastic about my, uh, sexual deviancy," George says bitterly. "I didn't want to come home. Now that I have, I know I was right for not wanting to."

His lips part. "What do they do to you?"

"It's nothing obvious. It makes me feel like I'm being sensitive for complaining about it, but it's fucking exhausting. They'll leave me in peace if I'm halfway across the country, because they can't tell me uni is a waste of time for an omega, or that I ought to be looking for a fucking alpha. Well, they can. But I can hang up on them. Living under the same roof fucking sucks."

"I never said any of that shit to you," Dream mutters.

"What?"

"I never told you to find a mate, I never even asked who you were fucking. I wanted you to do well on your exams because I know you're smart. But you ignored me anyway. Why?"

This is where George falters. He doesn't answer straight away like he usually does, with his shoulders relaxed and his smile wide enough to rival the sunrise. For once, he appears uncertain. And this is how Dream knows for certain there's something George hasn't been telling him, the undercurrent as to why he vanished after that night in the lighthouse. After all, they were best friends. One mistaken kiss couldn't be enough to erase that, no matter how deep they submerged themselves in each other.

"There's a reason, isn't there? Don't you think I deserve to know?"

George's arms are crossed over his chest. "I think you know I can't tell you."

"Why?" he asks, heels digging into the sand. "Why can't you tell me? You promised, when we were kids, you promised we would tell each other everything. I don't know a lot, but I know friends don't break their goddamn promises."

Dream thinks George is going to cry, because his eyes squeeze shut and his lower lip flutters. He

breathes like he's being crushed with eroded limestone. Despite all of this, his cheeks are free of rain and his voice free of water when he speaks again.

"Because I was a little bit in love with you, you fucking idiot. And you acted like kissing me was the most absurd thing you ever did in your life, so of course I didn't want to talk to you. I was trying to get the fuck *over* you."

In another life, Dream would take George's face in his hands and kiss him until he stopped holding his breath with terror, but they are just Dream and George, and they cannot leave the universe they've been dealt. If they could, they would've exchanged their cards a long time ago. He stares at George, filled with the strange sense of regret at something he can't control.

George loved him, even if only for a fleeting second in his life. George loved him.

Emptiness is the only thing he feels. He can't lean forwards and make this moment perfect like in the romance films, because Dream's emotions aren't written out by a director into a scriptbook for the consumption of idealists. He's lost in himself. He resents their strange, grey universe for managing to make things so complicated despite its nondescript city, street, and village names, its undivided reliance on straightforward biology.

"Did- did it work?" *Do you, could you, possibly still feel that way?*

"You are the most persistent boy I've ever met," George says, cheeks rosy pink and angled towards the floor. "I tried so hard. But you just kept calling me, and every time I had to pretend like it didn't mean anything to me. For myself."

"Yourself?"

"Yes, because listening to your stupid voice made me want to hold your hands, fuckface. I wanted you to call and say *George, I miss you, I'm in love with you*, and then you'd come to the city or something so I wouldn't have to feel like shit every time I let the phone ring out, I don't know."

"George..." he really does say his name as if it's made of pink petals.

"This is stupid, anyway. I spent so much effort trying to stop feeling like that and now you know anyway, and now you're going to tell me you don't even like omegas and that I'm disgusting and I should fuck off out of this town-"

"*George.*" Thorns sprout this time, stopping George in his tracks. Dream is tired of staring at the aces in his hands and wishing he could swap them for kings. They might be worth nothing, but he can't manipulate the stars any better than he can manipulate the new freckles dotting George's face. "Just stop for a moment."

"So you can laugh at me again?"

"No, of course not. I wanted you to come here," Dream breathes. "I wanted you to come here so I could ask you something."

"What is it?"

The cliff vanishes above him, and freezing water separates his body from the sky.

"How did you know you like omegas?"

"I-" George stops, his mouth agape. "Are you trying to say something?"

“Stop reading me for a while,” he pleads, reaching forward to finally, finally intertwine their fingers. George is cool against him, pale as snow capped waves. He doesn’t pull away. They stay joined as they fall, clutching each other hard so that the currents won’t rip them apart. “Can you just explain? And then I’ll explain afterwards.”

“Okay.” George’s next exhale is shuddering. “Fuck, let me see. A lot of people think that one day I woke up and decided to like omegas instead of alphas, but it’s not really like that.”

Dream nods, gripping George tighter so he won’t lose his nerve and clam up.

“It’s like...all these little things. You wait and wait to start liking alphas just like everyone else, but it never happens. And then you present, and you still don’t understand why the world revolves around them. At some point I realised I couldn’t imagine myself with one. Then I noticed how badly I wanted to be around you all of the time, and perhaps it wasn’t just because we’ve been best friends since we were kids after all. Fuck, that sounds so weird, I-”

“It’s not weird,” Dream says.

“It’s not?”

“No. Um, George?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t like alphas either,” he says before he can give himself time to second guess it. It’s the first time he’s said it out loud, admitted to the primal fear etched across his core.

“You like omegas?”

“I- I’m not sure,” he admits. “It’s difficult to sort it out when I’ve been so adamant I don’t. I feel like maybe....maybe I need to try it.”

“You mean sex?”

“Yes.”

George is silent for a long time, so long the rain grows louder against the windows and the wind more violent beyond their glass barrier. “I’ll fuck you, Dream.”

Water fills up his lungs, and his limbs grow numb in the Atlantic. Breathing doesn’t feel so intrinsic for the heartbeats it takes him to digest that one.

“Are you serious?”

“I’m serious,” George says, and now he’s leaning closer, closer. His features blur, and his breath is warm against Dream’s lips. “I’ve done this before—I don’t think there’s anyone you can trust more than me. Does this scare you, by the way?” He lands a kiss against Dream’s lips, chaste to test the waters. Abrupt as cloud to ground.

“No,” he breathes. He wants to be drunk on George instead of alcohol.

“Then I’m certain.”

When George kisses him properly, all Dream can think is how fucking stupid he’d been the last time around. He doesn’t force his tongue into Dream’s mouth before he’s ready, and his hands remain either side of his jaw rather than reaching below his waistband. And something about being

denied like that makes Dream *want* George to touch him, makes his pulse flicker in anticipation. With just one kiss, Dream has turned into an addict. He craves more.

“You can touch me, please, please-”

“I know,” George murmurs against the shell of his ear. His teeth graze it, and Dream has to clap a hand over his mouth to suppress the noise that works its way up his throat. He’s never known himself to be so loud. “I’m just taking my time, alright? You’re supposed to enjoy it.”

And George’s lips are against him again. He pushes with more force this time, morphine hand slipping down to press over Dream’s heart as his tongue glides across his bottom lip. George drinks up every whine Dream makes, and the way each one makes him press closer erases the embarrassment he feels about it. Whereas alphas kiss rough and violent, unorchestrated teeth and claimative hands, George allows Dream to bask in each action before he moves onto the next one.

Lightning strikes three times through the red of Dream’s eyelids before George’s hands reach under his shirt to splay at the bottom of his ribs. His fingers fit between each one, and his thumbs press into the dip of his sternum. The skin must be textured by now. Dream is electrified, with all his hairs standing on end as George licks into his mouth and kisses him at the pace of pouring treacle from the can. Sweet, heavy, unrushed.

George pulls away gasping for air, his lips pink and shining. “Are you scared yet?”

“No,” Dream says, wishing more than anything George would just kiss him again. Perhaps with those thighs straddling his waist. “Keep going,” he begs.

“You want me to keep going?” George thumbs at the jut of his hip, exhaling when Dream nudges into it. His autopilot is attuned to George now, senses narrowing until the thunder rolling overhead is background noise and George’s voice is the only thing he can hear with any degree of clarity.

“Yes, I want you to keep going. I’ll tell you if it stops feeling good, I promise.”

I want to fucking drown in you.

“Okay,” George says, barely higher than a murmur. “If you’re sure.”

“I promise.”

“But just one thing,” George says, fingers wrapping around both of Dream’s wrists as manacles. Soft, in a way iron isn’t. His eyes blink in earnest, huge pools of oak with imaginary rings to denote each scarred year of life he’s suffered with this. “I can’t do this if I’m just an experiment, okay? I can’t do this if you’re just gonna laugh about it afterwards, if you’re gonna show up with an alpha in a week’s time like nothing happened, I *can’t*.”

“I’m not going to fuck it up like last time. I won’t.” Dream is defiant.

He won’t, because he craves the way George smells of flowers in the rain, dewdrops rolling over rosebud petals, tiny fragments of shattered quartz. Peonies lining long blue streets with stardust collecting upon the horizon, honeysuckle light pouring out of streetlamps to shower his head with poached angels. Being this close to George doesn’t make him nauseous. Being this close to George sets wildflowers free in his arms, their roots wrapping around his heart.

“You smell of the city,” he says—he’s always had a bad habit for releasing whatever silken secret appears in his mind.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“It’s different. I like it because you look so much happier.”

“Dream...” George doesn’t say anything more than his name before he’s leaning forward to kiss him once more. If Dream concentrates hard enough, he imagines he can taste the feeling of his name upon George’s tongue, sweet and adored. The way George is sliding his hands over Dream’s chest and his tongue into his mouth is dirty, really, but he’s never felt so loved. For once, he’s not something to be abandoned upon the curb.

Dream’s shirt comes off first, and George’s follows after he tugs at the hem of it with impatient hands.

All he wants to do is kiss George more, kiss him until he can’t breathe, but the way his skin looks in grey light makes Dream pause. It flickers with every crack of lightning, raw energy caught in the dips of his collarbones. His chest flows without break into his ribs, his stomach, his shoulders, up to his neck where his scent gland grows roses. George is the garden now, he thinks. George is the garden and Dream is the sea, better when next to each other.

Then they’re leaning in again, and their eyes are slipping closed, and the tide is crashing ashore.

He loses track of how they end up bare, with their naked skin exposed to the storm. George’s skin doesn’t make him nauseous. They’re still exploring each other, mapping out their bodies with their hands instead of their eyes because their lips are still attached, and Dream never wants it to end.

George is so slender in his grasp, slender wrists and slender waist and slender arms which wrap around Dream and leave frostbite where he touches. Any sudden movements and he’ll snap. He’ll pull his clothes back on and desert the lighthouse, the ghost of what happened last time hanging over his head.

So Dream treats him carefully, and kisses with all the emotion swirling around in his mind.

Brambles grow in his stomach, twining around sweet Autumn fruit to poke red constellations across unassuming hands. He wants to spread blackberry all over his tongue, but George isn’t an alpha he can desert ten minutes after he’s done being used, sloppy release branding his thighs with dissatisfaction. George is pretty and delicate. George is touching him as though he’s wrapped in ribbons, brown sugar crusting atop creme skin. Dream yearns for harvest, dreads scarlet cuts and imperfections.

“Don’t be so nervous,” George whispers. Gentle hands run along his thighs, soft enough to send lightning crackling over his nerve endings, sour candy filling his mouth with desperation. “It’s just me.”

Exactly, Dream wants to cry, it’s you. That’s why it needs to be perfect.

“I’m sorry. But you’re really important, I want to get it right.”

“I’m important, huh?” George’s hands reach down to brush at Dream’s inner thighs, and wetness begins to collect at his entrance. Already. Dream isn’t sure how George coaxes it so fast, but he’s soaking and all they’ve done is kiss with all their clothes torn off. “You’re so eager,” he says, eyes taking in the hard press of Dream’s cock to his stomach.

“It aches,” he begs. “Nobody’s kissed me like that. Ever.”

“It’s a good kind of new?”

“Yes, of course it is.”

George smiles to himself, his lips more swollen than usual. “Do you want me to kiss other parts of you just the same?”

Dream doesn’t dwell upon the connotations of that, the thought of George mouthing along his cock borderline unbearable. Instead, he chokes up a strangled, “please,” and hopes it’s enough to convey the sentiment.

“Turn over,” George says.

Confused, Dream obliges, his ass displayed for George to stare at with dark eyes. It makes him squirm. He squirms more as soon as he realises where this is going, because George’s thumbs are soon pushing into his flesh and spreading him to the cool air, gooseflesh trailing down his thighs as he leaks and leaks. George exhales, and he feels it tease at his hole. A whine rips its way out of his throat, broken at the end as George continues to hover mere inches away from him, poised to unravel Dream with his narrow fingers.

The first touch of George’s tongue to his rim makes him clutch the blanket in both fists, fighting to keep his grip on reality. The thought of it is so filthy he can’t stop the gasp that floods over his lips or the push of his hips backwards.

“I haven’t even started yet,” George says, amused.

“I- I know. I’m just not used to being touched like this.”

“No shit.” There’s no bite to the words. If anything, George sounds impossibly endeared by Dream’s hypersensitivity. “You’re reacting like a virgin.”

The next time it happens, George’s tongue presses flat against him, wet from the slick dripping down his thighs. Dream’s never been ruined like this before, with wetness leaking out of him before they even begin. A flicker of self-consciousness taints his pleasure. Then it’s gone, because George is sucking at his rim, and he doesn’t seem to mind how easily his lips slide over Dream’s skin.

Imagining George with slick coating his mouth instead of gloss isn’t the wisest idea. His fingernails leave red imprints upon his palms and his cock begins to ache, harder than he’s been in his life.

“Fuck,” he gasps, eyes screwing shut as George dips his tongue into his hole for a second. It’s nothing like having thick fingers inside him, imprecise and working him open too quickly. It’s nothing like a knot against him, either. George is doing this just so that Dream’s thighs will start to tremble. His cock leaks against his stomach, neglected in lieu of George’s slender fingers slipping in alongside his tongue. This time, the stretch doesn’t sting like it usually would, doesn’t make him screw up his face in discomfort as he counts the seconds until it’s over. He wants more.

George finds his prostate in the same moment as his teeth drag across heated skin, and Dream swears he’ll cum untouched.

“Stop,” he gasps, whining as soon as George pulls away.

“Are you alright?” George’s voice is lower than he’s ever heard it, and *fuck* if that doesn’t make his naval roll in dark water.

“Yeah, I’m just—so sensitive. I’ll cum on two of your fingers, seriously. How do you do that?”

“Well. The thing about omegas,” George says, breaking off between words to lave over Dream’s hip bones, to adorn him with honey covered kisses, “is that they know what feels good. I know what feels good, because I’ve done it all myself. I bet no alpha’s ever made you feel like this.” His lips press into the centre of Dream’s cheek, and the gossamer ensnaring his mind tightens a little more.

“No,” he struggles, desperate for George’s tongue pressing at his hole again. “I don’t even cum most of the time, I have to pretend. They never bother to notice.”

“Those knots drain the blood right out of their brains, I’m telling you,” George laughs, although he sounds exasperated. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you, okay?”

“*Please,* need it so bad.”

George shushes him, lips upturned against his skin. “Just wait a little, okay? Can you do that?”

“Yes, I’ll do anything you w—*fuck.*” Dream splinters because George’s tongue is fluttering at his rim again, butterfly touches to tease him into seeing double. And George’s fingers feel so much better than he ever imagined they would as he stretches him, zeroing in on his prostate just enough that he doesn’t streak white across the blanket prematurely.

By the time George withdraws, Dream is convinced he’s died and ended up at the threshold of the underworld.

It’s surprising he can piece together enough coherency to say, “fuck me, wanna make you feel good.”

“This is about you, Dream.”

“It’s about you too,” he protests, pushing his hips back so George may be more inclined to swipe two fingers through the mess clinging to his hole and spread it along his cock. “I want to be good for you.”

I want to be just as good as all those other omegas you took to bed.

“You are, you’re being so sweet,” George says. “It’s so easy to make you tremble. Look at this—” his fingers slide against Dream’s rim and pull away with slick stringing between them— “you must be all pent up.”

Dream thinks about how often he’s woken up with his cock red with blood these last few weeks. “You don’t even know.”

And George’s hand is reaching downwards, and George is coaxing the slick along the length of his cock with pale fingers. Dream’s slick. Fuck. Dream doesn’t think he could count the seconds that pass while George tugs at himself even if he wanted to, because his mind is reduced to a chorus of varying profanities as he watches George’s thumb spread wetness over the head of his cock. After a moment, Dream’s eyes fall shut in maddening anticipation, every sensation amplified as though he’s been struck by lightning.

“*George,*” is what he moans when George pushes into him. Not *alpha*, not a name that doesn’t mean anything beyond a string of letters. “*George-*”

“You’re okay,” comes the reply from somewhere behind him.

And he really, really is. George is smaller than he’s used to, but he likes it because he doesn’t feel

so much like something to be used and cast away afterwards. There's less discomfort than usual, and he isn't struggling to pull oxygen into his lungs as his throat closes up and his vision prickles. George's hands are rubbing circles into his skin. His lips press over Dream's spine.

Alphas expect him to love the way they feel, the way they stretch him out beyond the pleasurable and into discomfort. They think it's all he wants, to be knotted and mated, attached to them forever. With George, it doesn't feel like a ritual they're going through as a means to an end. George makes him see static with every other thrust. George holds him with hedonistic fingers. They're doing this because they want to, and Dream's never felt so light during sex before, but he's certain he could evaporate right out of the sea and join the clouds if he willed it.

Honestly, comparing George to an alpha is a sin.

Mating marks and knots and abrasive scents tip out of his mind when George holds him tight and drives his hips against his ass over and over. He brushes against the sweet spot more often than not, nailing it head on whenever Dream's moans begin to die out. Then he withdraws, and misses it on purpose so he can catch his breath.

After a while of this, Dream's mind is somewhere outside of this room, fists curled tight with delirium. He's never had someone pay so much attention to him. George is looking for all his cues and taking them right on time, pushing his hips forward in a way that's downright maddening. And his hands remain steady on his hips, anchoring him to reality.

"I'm so close," he whines when the head of George's cock hits where it makes his toes curl. Since the passage of time is so slippery, he's not sure how long he's managed to last with George whispering dirty reassurances against his skin and sending lightning down his spinal cord.

"Cum whenever you want to," George says, and the press of his lips to his skin makes warmth settle into the pit of Dream's stomach. "This is about you."

He doesn't need much more persuasion than that. With George thrusting in exactly the right places, Dream can feel his body straining and straining as he approaches the edge, desperate to pitch over and into the sea.

The wind howls against the walls as he spills over his stomach, entirely untouched. He doesn't think he's ever finished with this type of stimulation alone, but as the waves of it continue to crash over him, he's certain he's been missing out.

Through the haze of his mind, he registers George pulling away from him. A whine escapes his lips, and he throws a hand back as fast as he can to wrap tight around George's wrist. "Don't stop," he manages between heaving breaths. "Want you...inside."

"You want me to finish inside?"

"*Please.*"

"Are you sure?" George is looking at him with an expression full of worry. His fingers continue to rub over Dream's skin, easing away the hollow weakness setting into his thighs.

"I'm sure. I can take it."

So George fucks him through the tail end of his orgasm and into overstimulation, hips drawing close to Dream's ass as certainly as, well, the waves. Dream can tie everything back to the gentle inhale-exhale of the earth.

He's convinced George must be perfect for him, because as soon as he begins to writhe from the abuse to his overworked insides, George slows, and slows, and slows.

Until he's filling Dream with himself, a low gasp tipping from his chest for Dream to revel in. He wants to hear it a hundred more times in his life, and that's terrifying. Instead, he forces himself to think about cum and slick mixing in the unholiest of cocktails, dripping out of his hole to ruin the blankets they have spread beneath them. And they stay locked together like that for a while. Not because they're forced to by their own bodies. But because they want to breathe in harmony.

Once they drift back into the present, they lie together with their backs against the blankets and their skin pressing in all the places Dream hoped it would. George is soft against him, willowy limbs stretching into his form with perfect pliancy.

The rainclouds continue to swarm, hornets eating away at Dream's mind.

Baptism makes men honest.

"I'm sorry I can't say I'm in love with you."

George looks up at him, passive. He doesn't howl or cry or beat at Dream's chest with closed fists, pleading for him to form empty words upon his tongue. "That's okay. This is the first time we've been a little more than friends, I know it'll take a while to make sense," is what he says, muted in comparison to the thunder. Whether it's outside the lighthouse or resonating within his skull, Dream doesn't know. "Fuck, you don't even have to like me, Dream. We can just go right back to how we were before, if you want."

"No, that's not how it is. I want to explain."

"So explain."

Dream tries in the best way he knows. "I feel like...I've always been sort of drowning, right? I've been drowning for a long time, and I never noticed it because it's always been like that and everything around me said human bodies are supposed to float. So I didn't realise how difficult it was to keep my head above the water. And then one day....imagine one day, you're told that actually, you were born different from everyone else, and you don't need to float at all, because you have gills instead of lungs. You just need to take the plunge. Wouldn't you be terrified to ignore everything you've ever believed and stick your head beneath the water instead? When you've always believed you needed to breathe air? I don't know if I would be able to do it."

"Wasn't this the plunge?" George asks, fingers trailing over Dream's hipbone, into the dip of his waist, up over his shoulder and to his lips. His eyes are awed, like he's relearning everything there is to know about Dream. Seeing him in a brand new light.

"Yes. But I'm not quite convinced it's alright to start breathing yet. I'm holding all this air in my chest, and I'm terrified to let it go just yet. Even if it's poisonous." He stops, and breathes. George holds his hand tight. "I'm terrified," he repeats.

"I understand," George says. "I went through all of this already, I understand."

"Am I going to be okay?" he asks, the blank ceiling blurring over his head.

"Yes." The word doesn't break in the middle, or falter, or snap. George says it as easily as breathing, as certain as the heart pounds against the ribs and pushes life force around a body. "You're going to be okay."

If his house can survive for more than a century with an unlucky thirteen steps smack in the centre of it, Dream thinks he can learn to weather the storm too. He pulls George close to his side and wishes he was older already. Perhaps then he wouldn't be lying here with guilt ringing his soul and dread poisoning his bloodstream. George doesn't deserve that.

He'll be alright one day, he knows. But for now, he's left in an ice bath, conflicted as to whether he should regret this or not.

Then George's lips press to his cheek, and he decides he can deal with it tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

before you literally chew me into small pieces and mail them off to farflung corners of the world, there is bottom g next chapter

end notes rant: tl;dr i overthink things

usually I would not make characters come up with analogies like that because I feel like that's not a thing people usually do when they're trying to deal with all that complex emotion. But one of my favourite dialogue passages (it's from nlmg) ever goes like this - *"I keep thinking about this river somewhere, with the water moving really fast. And these two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, holding on as hard as they can, but in the end it's just too much. The current's too strong. They've got to let go, drift apart. That's how it is with us."* - and i was like u know what i am going to also use a water analogy and ao3 can fight me about it honestly. idk why i'm justifying myself to this extent but i felt like i debated it so long i would anyways

same kinda thing with the fishing shit + memories, i know that's written really messy because i struggle to convey these things and i was going to edit it to make it more comprehensible but then i realised we are in dream's head anyways and thoughts are often difficult to put into writing so i left it. lmk if u understood wtf i was on about LMAO

there were some passages in this that i wrote like right after i finished jaw (that one fic i wrote that people seem to find me from) so if anything sounds overly pretty it's probably because i didn't adjust the writing style just yet. yes i am openly admitting this. i write for free lol

comments super appreciated as you can see i love rambling about my mistakes!
/laughing at myself

pill bottle

Chapter Notes

hello! popping in to say i'm aware a lot of heat sex classifies as dubcon (especially because i have accidental heat tagged sdjfdsj) but there is explicit consent beforehand + it kinda turns into um..purposeful heat?? man i do NOT know how to describe it it's kinda weird but you'll see what i mean. i wanted to provide a warning just in case :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Are you going to tell her?”

“What?”

They’re standing in the formation they adopt when it’s the end of the day, with Dream at the end of his front garden, and George on the pavement, heads tilted forward because neither of them want to be apart until morning. Streetlight washes George with gold. The smell of roses overpowers everything—there’s no scent to anemones, so they overlook as neutral observers. One by one, the stars blink to life overhead. And Dream is so caught up matching the constellations to each new freckle he’s discovered on George’s bare skin with his tongue, his teeth, ten fingers, that George’s next words are garbled in his head. A million light years away.

“Your mum. She’s there, isn’t she? Are you going to say anything?” George’s face has the sort of hope which comes with early spring written all over it. Grass pushing through snow, the earth of his eyes exposed as it melts to nonexistence.

Dream’s words are showery. They’re fat raindrops which snap the blades in half. “I- I can’t,” he says, with the thought of silent dinner tables and gravy boats growing cold beneath freezing stares. The thought of TV static crackling, how it makes everything seem less immediate, less personable. His mom wouldn’t want to know. In her eyes, he can be *normal* for a while longer, and perhaps that’ll spare him from facing the disappointment that’ll bleed into her gaze when she finds out. “Why would I? She wouldn’t understand.”

I didn't understand, for weeks and weeks.

He thinks George will dissolve under the words, snow in the rain. Instead, he’s stepping past the anemones to wrap his arms around Dream, holding on tighter and tighter with each crash of the tide. And Dream can’t hear the waves from here, but the memory of how they sound permeates his mind, and so in that moment, there’s nothing more real than the rolling of each one. Unshakeable.

The sea sticks to him even with the earth in his arms. He’s cursed with these gills of his.

“That’s okay,” George says eventually, lips ghosting across Dream’s collarbone. The skin there is discoloured, stamped with heart-shaped imprints of their debasement. “This is all very new for you.”

Dream laughs. “Yeah, you could say that.” It takes a good portion of his concentration to relax against George’s touch, even if the memory of him pushing past Dream’s rim continues to sting his thighs. His legs wobble when the wind blows too hard. They wobble more as George catches hold

of his fingers and squeezes them over his heart so that he can feel the thrumming of his pulse under his own skin as well as the steady thump-thump-thump of George.

“I can wait, you know. It’s only fair.”

“Huh?”

George’s nose screws up in embarrassment. “I mean because...I left for a long time, and that wasn’t really right. So I can wait, if you need to figure any of...this out.”

“I want to have sex with you,” Dream blurts with burning cheeks. “I want to do this again—I thought that was pretty obvious.”

“Mmhmm.” A beat, and lips press to the centre of his forehead. He shudders despite himself. George notices. “It’s easier to figure out what your body wants,” he says, gaze dipping downwards for a moment, “it tells you in black and white. This is a little harder.” George taps the spot over Dream’s heart with two fingers.

Then he draws away, and Dream is struck with the thought of George jamming his keys into the blue door across the street, sprinting up the stairs with his neckline up around his chin to disguise the discolouration trailing all the way down to his collarbones. He thinks of him in the middle of his double bed, starfished because there’s far too much space for someone as lithe as him. A pillow clutched to his chest instead of a body. Frost creeping under the door, and an hourglass ticking down the seconds until he can run away to the city again.

Dream wants him to stay longer.

“Can you sleep with me?” he asks, before realising how the connotations of that are altered by the numb ache between his legs. “Not like that—I just mean I want to hold you.”

George’s shoulders drop. “Of course. But first—”

His hands cradle Dream’s jaw, unseen as the night conceals them. Soon, they’ll have to go inside and pretend this afternoon hasn’t happened at all, let go of each other’s hands and shorten their glances. But for now, Dream is content to surround himself with flowers. Especially as George leans closer, and closer, until his breath is warm against Dream’s skin and his heart is beating faster because his blood still hasn’t learnt how to cope with the water pressure that is touching another omega like this. Diver’s disease.

George kisses him under the streetlight, and something about submerging himself in rose petals eases the sea crabs crawling over the back of his neck.

Most things are governed by the movement of celestial bodies. Dream can feel it most when seawater is sliding over his skin, invisible hands splayed out over his back to push his stomach towards the sun. And the waves rise, and fall, and rise, and fall. On a larger scale, the tide swells upon the shore, pulled back and forth by the moon's orbit—it's easy to imagine when he's floating like that, lighter and less important than stray driftwood cast into the water. The moon is much bigger than him, so he figures it can drag his seaglass body wherever it wants.

These days, he watches how the planet spins every time he wakes a little earlier than George, vision blurry and purple sunlight falling through the gap in his blind. They must be out of sync, because he keeps an hour to himself each morning to slow his breath and exhale at the same time as George does. He counts it. Of course he does.

George's chest rises, and falls, and rises, and falls.

Speaking of circadian rhythms, Dream is thinking about how cruel it is that Latin for *day* is *dies*, because he sort of wants to die at the beginning of every day when George isn't awake just yet, and he's just slumbering away on his chest, lips crooked at the corner, and he's on breath eight hundred and ninety now, eight hundred and ninety one—

Dream stops counting when George's eyelids flicker with consciousness. Just like he does every morning. And the black tide crawling up the beach recedes once more, tugged back to safety by pale hands and midnight eyes because George is the only thing that makes sense in their world that revolves too fast.

"Good morning," is the first thing Dream says when George looks up at him. He's got his head on his chest, and he bobs up and down as though they're in the middle of the sea. Breathing, orbiting, spinning so quickly the air in his lungs seizes up.

George groans. He does every day, and then he pushes his face nose-first into Dream's chest, and then he hums noncommittally under his breath but Dream knows it means *good morning* too.

Then the in-between stage arrives, where George isn't asleep or awake, but in limbo between the two. Dream spends it with his nose shoved into George's hair, fingers catching on each bump of his spine as he drags his fingers over his back. Rose paints his vision at the same time it paints the sky. Sunrises become his salvation. The stars on his ceiling stop glowing, but it's alright because he's watching George breathe and live and hum under his breath as he shakes the cobwebs from his mind to leave behind fresh eyes.

"Let's go swimming again," he says more often than not, bruises trailing up his neck where Dream's kissed him too hard.

Today isn't one of those mornings.

The sky is clear just like always, but Dream's stomach turns with uncertainty, and the weathervane across the street hurtles backwards and forwards as the wind flows indecisively. It buffers against the side of the house, rushes over the roof. It buffers against the side of the house, rushes over the roof in a stampede of washed-up sea storms. Forceful enough to make his bones tremor. And this is how Dream knows something will be different today, even as George reaches consciousness on his chest and leans up to press their lips together.

"Good morning," he says first.

George groans.

The in-between stage arrives, like the train which pulls into the station at the end of the town twice a day. Proof that the world exists beyond the outermost web of lanes ensnaring them here, prey to the cliffs.

The in-between stage is pink, since that is the colour of the sun when it's at its youngest. Or maybe it's just George, with his rose scent and blood rushing to the tip of his nose. X marks the spot, Dream thinks. He leans down to kiss across George's cheeks, his forehead, the bridge of his nose, eyes blown wide with wonder at how good forbidden things taste.

But he's still terrified it'll all come to an end when he's thrown out of Eden.

"Do you want to go swimming?" George asks when his voice has pieced itself together at the back of his throat.

Last night is murky. It's all crumpled sheets and fingers gripping the headboard for dear life, his face shoved into a pillow because he's unable to contain the noises which swamp his tongue whenever George's hands are bracketing his hips and his cock is nudging up against the spot which makes him see stars. Real stars, not the odd green ones he's stuck to his ceiling. Last night is shower water sliding over pale skin, and candlelight illuminating a hand smaller than his own grasping at his fingers. He has to strain to remember, really.

Now, the only evidence he has that any of it was real are the bruises sprawling up his neck and the soreness emanating from deep within his muscles. The thought of plunging headfirst into the sea again stings. Particularly when the bed holds him gently, and the wind rocks the house back and forth. His bedsheets are clouds. George breathes in slowly, breathes out slowly, rhythmic enough that Dream's eyelids begin to droop, drowsiness flooding every neuron.

"No," he says, revelling in the way his oxygen tastes an awful lot like rose milk at the moment.

"Why?"

"Sore."

When upturned, George's eyes flicker amber instead of oppressive midnight. Must be something to do with the sun. Dream thinks he could swim in them all morning instead of the ocean, and wouldn't be able to tell the difference afterwards. "You're sore," he says, one corner of his lip pulling upwards.

"Yeah. Stop looking at me like that, it's your fault."

George snorts, before pushing his face back against Dream's chest so his voice comes out muffled. "Sorry, we can stop having sex if you want."

"You're such an idiot."

"No, you."

They bicker back and forth for a while like the imprints of their teeth aren't branded all over each other's skin, as if they don't have matching love bites right over the soft junction between their necks and shoulders where the scent gland lies. It's sentimental, but Dream can't help himself from leaning forward to bite at it every time they're in bed together, watch the way it makes George's head tip up and his eyes roll back. Sensitive, like anything delicate should be. Yet not delicate enough to last forever—Dream's teeth are decidedly not sharp enough to claim George as his just as he desires. It'll fade by the weekend.

So each time George does it back, he has to pretend it doesn't ache when the bite doesn't hurt enough to be permanent.

Now, Dream reaches for his nightstand, fingers clutching at the pill bottle resting upon its surface. He sits up so he can swallow one dry. When his head tips back to its usual position and his hand falls away from his mouth, George's eyes are trained on the bob of his throat, features placid. Contemplative.

"How often do you take those?" It's the first time he's asked, but it seems as if the question's been brewing upon his tongue for a while now.

"All the time."

George sucks a breath through his teeth. "Dream, that's not good for you."

"I know. But um, I don't want to go into heat."

"Why? It's perfectly natural."

Burning skin, itching muscles, hazy vision, periods of memory loss. Dream's read all about it. None of it sounds appealing to him, no more than the smell of olives and the press of a knot does.

"Well, there are a lot of things that aren't," he says, tongue rushing ahead of him.

George's expression folds itself into small pieces. "Dream, you don't mean that."

"...no, I don't," he says after a while, because he knows as well as George does how effectively terror can poison his words, sharpen them to thorns and lodge them in the soft skin covering his throat. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

He thinks once more. "Can you tell me what it's like?"

"What? Heat? Don't you know all about it?"

"I don't think textbook diagrams are the same as experience," he mutters, eyebrows furrowed into a deep V shape. "They never really cared much about that, because, like, we'll figure everything out, right? With an alpha, probably."

George plucks the pill bottle from the nightstand, and as he does it, his thumb rubs over the text printed onto the label. As if he hasn't read it a hundred times before. "The first time isn't so fun," he says. "For a while, I felt like I was gonna die—my heart was beating so fast and I thought my skin would burn off."

"Great."

"No," he hurries, and something about his voice calms the panic. "It's like that at first, but you get used to it after a while. Then you can enjoy it."

It doesn't sound particularly enjoyable to Dream. "Do you um, do it with other people?"

"Yeah."

"Omegas?" Dream is certain his eyes are widening of their own accord.

The peal of George's laugh isn't cruel, isn't the same as the glares exchanged over a dinner table. More like he's holding Dream's caterpillar body in his palms and is delighted by the way he's fluffy enough to make him tickle. "Yes, Dream. Other omegas."

"Oh. I guess I never really thought about that."

About struggling through a heat without a knot to keep him full, and an overpowering scent to block out the smell of just about everything else in the world. Heats are natural. This is not.

"You called when I was in heat one time," George says, orange refraction pulsing over his palms as he rotates the pill bottle in the sun. "I knew it was you because it was the first day of the month. I didn't even have anyone over that time—fucked up with scheduling or something. I wanted to answer it *so bad*, like I would fucking die if I didn't, but I knew if I heard your voice when I was like that it would only make everything worse."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but...not anymore. There's nothing to be afraid of, you know?" He's smiling to himself like he's imagining going into their heats together, mouths sloppily attached to each other and desperate hands everywhere. A bed covered in blankets and unwashed hoodies and pillows, twice as bad as it would normally be because they're both omegas. Endless slick between their thighs, eyes unfocused and delirious.

Dream's stomach twists at the thought of it, at the thought of blurry vision, of boiling skin and trembling at even the lightest of touches. Rendered helpless for hours on end, his mind reduced to a size too tiny for his skull so it bounces against the bone uselessly. And most omegas feel like this about their first heats, full of trepidation at the mere prospect of surrendering sobriety to primal desperation.

But underneath it all, there's a fear far more sinister.

He's terrified he's faking all of this just so George won't leave again. He's terrified that if he goes into heat he'll beg for an alpha like everyone else, and George's face will crumple with bruising betrayal.

He's terrified because he's still a teenager, really. What if he doesn't know how he feels?

"Dream." George pulls him from his reverie. "You're thinking too hard."

"No I'm not."

George angles his eyes skywards. "You're staring at the ceiling like you do when you're miserable."

"I just like counting the stars," he says, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Just tell me what it is." The bed dips as George climbs onto it, pill bottle discarded on his bedside so it can continue to throw sunset orange across the wood. Then he appears, and the stars give way to pale skin and dark hair. One of his legs hitches. He speaks when he's situated with his thighs on either side of Dream's hips and his fingers curled around his wrists, pinning him to the mattress by his pulse points. "I can try and help. I'm not getting off until you do."

A sigh falls into the space between them, full of attic dust. Dream's eyes water. Something about watching how weightless the motes are makes him want to shed the thoughts plaguing him day by day, night by night. The ones that lean in close and whisper *you're not good enough* with rotting

teeth.

"I'm scared I've got it all wrong," he says after a moment.

"It?"

"I mean, I'm scared I'll realise one day that I like alphas and I just couldn't find the right one, I'm scared I'll be unmated forever because of it. What am I gonna fucking do if that happens? I'll die alone, probably, and I'll have amounted to nothing." Dream's tongue slips around in his mouth, easy to spit venom when the threat of George's departure hangs over his head. This....thing that they're doing is alright now, because George is here to kiss his tears into his skin and rub his back when his lungs begin to work overtime. When he leaves, Dream will be even more broken than before.

"Dream, come on. You don't need an alpha to determine your worth. You don't have to be with one just because that's what you've been told your entire life-

"That's easy for you to say!" he snaps, unable to hone the tirade. It spills out of him in a wave, gathering brine and seabed sand for every metre it advances. Until Dream has half the town behind his words, his hatred for the church spire and the school and the streets and the way grit sticks to every surface no matter how many times he washes them. "You're fucking smart, George. You'll finish uni and get a good fucking career and you won't ever need an alpha to put food on the table, but I don't have that luxury. I've always believed it was okay to fail school and end up working a nothing job, because I wouldn't need to once I was mated. But I don't like alphas, I like you, and I'm fucked once you realise how boring I am."

"Are you done?"

"No," Dream says brokenly. "You're pretty and intelligent and you have a fucking future. You don't need me in it."

"What if I want you in it?"

"You could be with someone prettier than me," he says, words dripping with bitter lemon. The perfect omegas plastered all over adult magazines stick to the front of his mind with their tiny wrists, slender waists, pink cocks pressed shyly against pale stomachs. "I'm like an alpha anyway, big all over. Dumb like one too. You haven't even let me fuck you, and I get it. I'm too much like an alpha."

"But you're an omega. I don't care how tall you are, or what your scent is like, or how big your fucking cock is, okay?"

"There are better omegas-"

"*Dream*, shut up for a minute. There's no right way to be an omega, or whatever it is you've been told to think. Do you really think I care about that? About what we're supposed to be like? If I did, I probably wouldn't be fucking other omegas, would I?"

"Oh."

"Yeah. You just gotta believe me, okay?"

"I'm trying," he says, holding onto George as he leans forward to connect their lips. It lasts for a second, but it's long enough for him to tell George isn't mad despite all the horrible things he says. George is far too forgiving of Dream, and he knows that's why he had to leave in the first place. So

he wouldn't have his heart broken again and again and again. But now he's got what he wanted all along, and still Dream tears into his chest. "Why do you let me say so many bad things?"

"Would you rather I screamed at you instead?"

"For you, maybe."

He laughs. "But I'm not angry. And you say *bad things* because you're hurting, and I want to help it stop hurting."

"And being upset with me isn't going to make it end?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

George's palms press flat over his cheeks, and Dream feels the storm bashing against his skull calm for a moment. Soothed by gentle skin, soft touches. "I know I seem like I know what I'm doing, but that's because I had to take the time to figure it out the hard way. I was fucking terrified when you kissed me in the lighthouse, because I realised I never wanted it to stop, never wanted to let go of you and- and find some idiot knothead instead. I was more terrified when you laughed it off like it was nothing, because then I knew I wasn't normal. So I went to uni, had a lot of sex, yeah, but also just talked to people, you know? People like me. It's a lot different outside of this town."

"It's better?"

"God, yeah. So much better. Come with me? I want to show you what it's really like."

"When?"

"Whenever. Right now. We could go *right now*, if you want to."

Packing his life away into a backpack, tracing the undulation of the lanes as they become narrower and narrower before widening to roads once more, holding George's hand through all of it so he doesn't float away. It sounds nice. Really. To leave everything behind, to stop caring about how precarious its position upon the cliff edge is. He wonders if his mother's face would crumple, if his dad would turn grey in his absence. If the anemones in the front garden would die, if the blankets covering his bed would turn grey the same as George's did, if the sea would stop yearning for his bones. If his window would fall dark, just like the lighthouse.

It's a little much to think about in the pink of the morning.

"Maybe not before I've showered," he says, light as the strawberry cloud falling around his head.

"Mmm, good point."

After a sleep-ridden hum of agreement, George is leaning in.

He isn't supposed to taste good—not with morning sticking to his tongue. Dream kisses him regardless. With his fingers clutching at the neckline of George's borrowed shirt and their legs tangled in knots, teeth clicking every time he tries to deepen the kiss too hurriedly. Sometimes it sounds funny, the press of wet lips against each other, and he has to pull away for a moment to laugh into the skin of George's neck. Then their eyes meet again, but George isn't frustrated with him. His thumbs press into Dream's cheeks, gentle enough to make his heart swell, firm enough so he may imagine the imprint of whorls like unique tree-rings left behind.

"It's early," George says, bathing in dawnlight as it spills into his exposed collarbones. He ghosts

over the tears encrusted to his eyelashes. "And you're upset." Breathing becomes easier when George sits up, knees pressing into the mattress on either side of Dream's hips. Pink drips from every join and curve. This boy is made of sunlit roses, Dream thinks, so far from the way heather blows violently in the wind, a waymarker for how hard the skies tear at the land. And that's them, isn't it?

"Okay."

"Okay."

Dream holds out for a few seconds before his chin tips forwards and his head back, until he's staring at his headboard with his arms crossed over his chest. "*George*," he whines, much too aware of the itch settling under his skin. "Go back to kissing me. Makes everything better."

And worse, all at the same time.

George answers him with gentle fingers against his jaw and gentler lips against his own, practised in a way Dream isn't. He's not used to kissing someone like this just yet, when it's more about push and pull rather than allowing himself to be torn apart by white water. There's more elegance to it. Like when George bites at his bottom lip to make his breath shutter. Or how his hands reach below Dream's waistband and tug his cock free all without coming up for air, or how his thighs squeeze around his hips as he leans forward to grind and *grind* at the same pace clouds part after a storm.

Slow, unhurried. Bearing sunlight in abundance.

This is how Dream cums—with the weight of George anchoring him to the bed and narrow fingers struggling to wrap around the both of them. Seafoam floods his vision for a moment. TV static follows as his world pieces itself back together, and he resurfaces to the sight of George with cum sliding over his stomach, head tipped down as he claws for oxygen. The tops of his cheeks are stained red. It's slow and sweet and the heavenlight tastes of sugar as it colours them gold.

But they're far from saints. No amount of rain, salt, or sea air can erase that.

Dream's eyes trace out constellations as George is cleaning the mess from between their thighs, so carefully every touch begins to sting rather than soothe.

When he's done, he fits their bodies together like they've been doing it for years, as though they've evolved into some kind of symbiosis where the jigsaw pieces of the world begin to make sense when they're puzzling it out together. Pulse to pulse, hearts slowing in unison. George breathes, Dream exhales. Over and over and over, just as surely as the world spins, and the moon pulls, and the tide beckons.

But not all symbiosis is equal exchange, and Dream still feels like a parasite.

"I'm so sorry," he says as the stars blur above him.

George lifts his head from his chest, hair tossed in every direction, brow furrowed, thumbs reaching up to press under Dream's sore eyes. "What for?"

"For wishing you were an alpha."

Anyone else would be offended by Dream's forwardness, would roll right out of bed and tell him there are some things he ought to keep to himself. George is too used to him. He kisses Dream slow, and he wishes he'd storm out of the room instead so he could find someone who'd love him

without guilt, without shame. Just as he deserves.

"Aren't you mad?" he asks once he manages to pull away, breathless from rose oil kisses.

"I am mad," George says. His face remains contemplative as calm waters, and Dream wants nothing more than to drown in him so that he might feel tranquil too. "Just not at you. I'm mad at whoever made us need to unlearn these things in the first place."

"Oh."

"Dream, let's get out of this fucking town. I'm tired of sand in my bed sheets." George rolls off him, and his arms feel emptier than they ever have before. The bed is cold despite the summer heat pressing at the windows. Dream's chest solidifies to a glacial wasteland rather than the currents which bubble in white veins along his coastline. He watches through drooping eyelashes as George opens his wardrobe, flicks through the hangers strung along the rail in second hand shop disorganisation, and pulls an unironed shirt over his head. It falls to his mid thighs. And it should make Dream's heart squeeze—he'd love to say it does, but instead it reminds him how oversized he is to George. All stretched out in the wash, left crumpled on the kitchen floor with limbs too big for his standing. "I'm gonna pack for you unless you get your ass out of bed."

"What am I gonna tell my mom?"

"The truth."

"That I'm fucking another omega? I can't, you know that."

If George winces, it's covered by the wardrobe door as it squeals on its hinges. "Okay, *some* of the truth. Just tell her the parts she needs to hear."

"What am I gonna tell my fucking job, George?"

"Nothing."

Sand fills his throat just the same as how it sticks between his joints, abrasive enough to rub him red and raw. The spark he's been fanning in his heart since George mentioned seeing the city smoulders away into embers, until it's camouflaged by its backdrop of inky nightfall. "I can't lose my job. I'll never get another one, I know I won't. I only got it because everyone in this town knows who I am."

George sits down at the edge of the bed with a stack of folded clothes balanced upon his lap, deft fingers moving corner to corner, edge to edge. "Don't worry about that. Life has a weird way of working itself out, even when you feel like it never will."

"Just because it did for you-"

"We'll make it. I'll do anything if it means I get to keep you."

"You could've called more," Dream says for the hundredth time, and it's a low blow but he's feeling particularly dejected right now. He'll be all out of place in the city, with a mind duller than the rest and less tools at his disposal.

"I know. And it's the biggest mistake I've ever made."

"You still did it-"

"I'm sorry, okay?" George says, fingers knotted tight into the bedsheets. It's the most strained Dream's heard his voice in a while, and it stings to be on the receiving end of it. Eyebrows drawn together, bottom lip trembling. Linen bunched up around his hands. "I'm fucking sorry I don't have a better answer for you, but this is all I know. We just have to try, alright?"

Dream is struck with the bolting realisation that George is only a year older than him, rather than the millennia it feels like when he's speaking in reassured sentences and a flat water tone. George is staring at him with his jaw set. George fucking believes in him, for whatever reason. In a world that's marked him as zero simply for existing.

If George can spill out his secrets on the beach, stay in the town longer than necessary, hurtle over the cliff precipice with Dream's hand in his, walk to the lighthouse in the rain, it's the least Dream can do to trust him right back.

So he whispers it when he says *okay*, for it's closer to flashing torches than usual words are.

George's shoulders tremble when he embraces Dream in the morning light, squeezing tight enough that Dream knows he intends to never, ever let him go.

After that, they start doing everything as though they're saying goodbye.

Dream can't place a finger on *why*, because he'll be back before he knows it. He'll have to come back sooner or later, step over the threshold not as a prodigal son, but as something of a failure. In one way or another. Then his dinner times will look much the same as George's, and their houses will mirror each other just like the opposite windows do.

Slammed doors, raised voices, gravy boats turning cold.

But they swim into all the cliff caves and lay their palms flat against the back walls, they jump from every precipice they know, they run along each jut of the headland and empty their lungs out over the side of it. Screaming and screaming, red faces, toes curled into the heather. Loud enough to carry all the way to Florida, Dream likes to think.

They scratch their names into things they shouldn't, and stand outside the school gates to laugh at how tiny the building seems now that they're both older. Dream sells his last bottle of nail polish and ensures to remember the shade—it's called Wonderland, so he can only hope that's a good omen. Then he locks the doors for the last time. Leaves his blue polo in a crumpled heap on the floor. Grabs a bag from a far corner of his cupboard and folds his clothes tight so they'll fit inside.

He doesn't own many. While George is pieced together every day and made to look pretty, Dream's never really had a problem with washing the same shirts over and over and over, only buying new ones when the necklines stretch and the colour fades. His stomach turns like the washer.

As misfortune would have it, his mom walks past his room with a stack of folded blankets in her

arms, the smell of clementine tipping between their creases to surround him with the feeling of *home*. She appraises what he's doing with a quick glance, and it's clear enough Or perhaps it wasn't so unfortunate. Dream left his door open, as if he wanted to be caught.

He thinks maybe that was a good idea, because this is probably a conversation they need to have.

She vanishes along the landing, but reappears without the laundry, so Dream assumes it's been discarded somewhere as a second priority.

The bed dips under her weight. "What are you doing?" she asks, reaching her hands back so she can lean on her palms. The lines of her face seem deeper than Dream remembers them, and he's struck with the realisation that he doesn't *face* her so much these days. He's so much taller than her that he's more akin to looking at the space above her head, and when they're eating he's either staring into his food or into the TV screen, a high neck covering the bruises littered over his skin.

"I'm packing," he says honestly.

"You're packing."

"Mmhmm." He flattens his fingers against the inside of the bag in an attempt to shove his socks deeper. The seams protest.

"For what?"

"I'm going to the city. With George. He wanted me to see it."

"That's nice."

"Yep." There's a knot growing in his stomach, wrapping its roots around his intestines. He's wearing a shirt so stretched it falls off his bones, and it's painfully obvious that there's a collar of bites wrapping around his neck. But she doesn't mention it, and she doesn't ask why he smells of roses, either.

She peers into his closet, takes in everything remaining upon the shelves. Which is to say, not much at all. "It seems to me like you're going for a long time," she says, a divot between her brows.

"I'm nearly nineteen," he says defensively, "I can go for as long as I want."

"What about your job? I know you're happy George is back, but you shouldn't be making him your entire life-"

"He *is* my entire life, mom."

The earth stops spinning for a moment.

Then it resumes, but it's too fast, and Dream is reminded of how he felt when he first found out the planet hurtles around and around at a thousand miles per hour. Like he could somehow empathise with the clothes in the washer, drowning and spinning and stretching and fading as he's tossed around this grey little town.

There's time to take it back, to say George is his best friend and nothing more, but the memory of George's lips pressed together in determination when he'd told Dream he was in love with him shatters across his mind. Fear behind dark eyes, breaching for impact. George has had to do this a million times—tell people he likes omegas even if he's not sure of what the consequences will be. And he's still in one piece, so Dream figures he can do it too.

It's not as easy as flicking the lightswitch. His words trip over themselves on the way out, clunky and unpracticed. "George likes omegas," he says, waiting for the connotations of that to snap into place like puzzle pieces.

"And you think you're like George."

"I don't know. I just know that I like him."

"Okay."

Okay?

For something that feels so huge in proportion to the brittle walls of Dream's heart, his mom's reaction doesn't seem so fitting. He's expecting her to scream at him, say he doesn't know what he wants. Say the people on the TV have rotted his mind. But instead, her gaze is steady, and she's not moving from the bed in order to prevent him shoving his life into the bag.

"I thought you would be mad," he admits.

Finally, finally, she laughs, and her smile lines deepen. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"What?"

She sighs. A greying strand of hair falls in front of her face, but she doesn't lift a hand to remove it. It glows silver in the light, reminiscent of wet sand at witching hour. "Look at you," she says, gaze dropping over the red of his hair, the pink marking his neck. "George comes over every day, so I don't know why you thought I wouldn't notice."

"You knew?" Shame burns hot in his stomach, acid sloshing against the soft lining of it. The tips of his ears must be closer in shade to his hair than usual, and each hiccup burns hot against the dusty air. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"You're not a kid anymore. There are some things you need to figure out by yourself, mistakes you need to make so you won't do it again. I can't help with that."

"Do you think this is a mistake?"

She pauses then, her lips twisting together in contemplation. The clouds convulse while he's waiting with bated breath, leaning forwards as if examining the freefall below. His stomach undergoes a strange sensation of vertigo, soap suds filling his insides as the clothes toss around. He resists the urge to run for the bathroom.

"I'm worried about you," she says eventually. "I'm worried because I'm a very different person than I was when I was twenty, and I'm worried because I thought I knew better than the world. I'm letting you do this because nothing *bad* is going to happen if I do, but I'm worried you'll grow to regret it."

"I don't think this part of me is going to change," he says lowly, hands gripping tightly at the straps. He has a piece of George's rage, George's defiance stored safely against his chest, pale hands pushing him forwards. "I wish it would, but it won't."

"Okay," she says again, head tipping to one side. "That's for you to figure out. Your room will still be exactly the same if you want to come back to it."

It's not complete understanding, but at the same time, he hadn't really been expecting her to

understand at all. He gets up from the floor and sits next to her, wrapping his arms around her to hook his chin over her shoulder. Clementine, he thinks. She's holding him just the same as she did when he was a foot shorter, and something about it makes him feel, if only for a moment, that perhaps he's not as oversized as he thinks. Besides, sometimes the stretched shirts are the comfiest to wear.

"I love you," he says, for the first time in years.

She hums, rocking back and forth like the swell. "Stay safe, okay? There are... *things* in the city which don't make it here, like—"

"Mom, I know," he says with a laugh. "I'll be fine, I promise."

Somehow, he knows it's true.

The door to George's room whines when it opens, the handle knocks into the opposite wall and the carpet scratches underneath it. George's mom stands at the bottom of the stairs, disgruntled by the way Dream pushed past her a few seconds prior. It's not very polite of him. But he figures this is important, and he doesn't have time for pleasantries.

"George," he says breathlessly.

Behind him, the door slams shut.

George is propped up on his elbows, a book discarded upon the bed next to him. He's only wearing boxers, and Dream allows himself to look at the angular lines of him for three seconds before he remembers why he's here in the first place. "I told her," he says, the same pace as the spinning of the earth.

"What? Slow down," George says, an amused little smile pinned to his face as Dream climbs onto the bed and pulls him in by the waist. Nose rubbing against his scent gland. Evening rose washes over him, humming through his veins until his heart begins to slow down and the adrenaline loss leaves him sleepy.

"I told my mom about you, idiot."

George's eyes widen, apprehensive. "You did?"

"Yeah. It kinda slipped out."

There's a sharp intake of breath by the side of his head, and George's hands are tracing the same patterns they always do into his back. Between each of his freckles. "What did she say?" he asks, voice schooled into something neutral. Even though Dream isn't showing any signs of upset, no distraught tears sliding over his face.

"She's nervous about it. Is it bad that I don't blame her?"

"You're nervous too?"

"So fucking nervous," he admits. He sits up so he can look George in the eyes, so much less intimidating than it had been when he first returned. His eyes are the same colour as always, and the only thing that's changed is the way they light up whenever he's looking at Dream, as though he's the fucking sun. "It's okay that I'm nervous, right? It's normal."

"Yes," George says, leaning forward to press his lips to Dream's forehead. "You're nervous because you haven't seen the same things I have. I'm gonna show you, remember? I'll show you the fucking world."

"Show me the world," he agrees, as if he's not holding a pretty good idea of it safe in his arms.

That evening, they're sitting in the cove again, hands splayed out in front of the fire. Their hair drips onto the rocks, and Dream's stomach still folds itself inside out as he thinks about the fall into the water. George's head rests upon his shoulder. Above their silhouettes, the stars blink to life one by one, unmarred by polluted air. They're clearer here than they are in the city, George says in between naming each one, the stars are clearer, and the tap water better, and the winds are enough to make him feel as if the skin will peel away from his face. Cleansing, in a way.

"You're not really selling the city to me," Dream says. They're leaving in the morning, and all George has done is complain about how he'll miss swimming with salt in his eyes.

"There are other things instead. Things which make you forget." George sips from the brown bottle in his grasp. Apples, Dream thinks. "But I still look at postcards from the sea and long for it."

"To swim?"

George's cheeks catch the firelight, glowing orange and yellow. His features are dark—dark eyebrows, dark eyes, dark hair, so he ignites with fire every time he's sitting next to it. Or perhaps that's just because he's a commander of the tides. "I think...I think it won't be so bad this time. Maybe looking at the postcards will make me the good kind of nostalgic."

"Why?"

"Because I'm bringing you with me, idiot. You're like a piece of the sea."

"What if my scent changes? Like yours did?"

"You know, I don't think it will," George says, confident. "Somehow, I think you'll be just fine."

"I don't want it to change."

"No?"

"No," he mutters. The slide of alcohol over his tongue is welcome, and despite the fire, bumps begin to raise all the way up his arms. Before them, the sea waves like it's saying goodbye. "It was yours, you know. Before you left. So that's my piece of you."

As if they're both jigsaws, and they've swapped one of their pieces. It fits in the gap, of course. It's not conventional, it's not what the instructions on the box say, but it works for them.

They're complete.

They don't run away like people do on projectors. There's no screaming at the sky with their pretty mouths and colour corrected eyes, there's no holding their arms out to cup the world whole, there's no swelling overture as they escape through backlanes in the dead of night.

There is only George's hand gripping his own between their bodies where nobody else can see it. The mundane hum of the train into the station as it arrives three hundred and eleven seconds late. Seagulls all lined up along the platform railings. Grey skies stretching on for miles. And the receding sound of the sea as they step off the concrete and into the carriage, the whirring of the engine underneath their feet once the train splutters to life and retraces its path back to the city from the outermost reaches of the country.

Dream isn't sure whether he's sad or not, to see each grey house shrink and shrink until they blink out of existence, perhaps reclaimed by the cliff-edge.

The fields don't look any better than they did before. If anything, they look worse. Now Dream's got his cheek pressed against the glass and he's watching each crooked fence post pass them by, he notices how the grey of the town makes the foothills appear more saturated. And now he's lacking it, the colour's bled right out of them. He's not sure where it's gone.

He turns to George, and finds a garden in the seat next to him.

Pink cheeks, rosy fingertips. He watches through the window as their surroundings blur with his lip tugged between his teeth, white where his blood rushes away from the pressure.

Dream stops concentrating on the fields after that.

The city appears out of nowhere, and Dream's ass is beginning to ache because he's been sitting down too long. After a day of pulling into station after station, town after town, his whole body aches. Every town was too familiar to him, too grey, too pocket-sized and crowded into valleys, hills, fields. They grew bigger the further into the country they went. And the sea was left a thousand leagues away to sing their names.

By the time they reach the outskirts, they're most likely closer to the other coast than they are to theirs. The coast which faces the continent, a thin channel of water wrapping around the island to separate it from everything else. If he were to swim there, maybe it would feel like the shallows. Maybe the currents wouldn't be so soul consuming, maybe the waves wouldn't push him five fathoms under and crush his lungs bit by bit.

All at once, there are roads and warehouses and electricity wires everywhere. They only increase in size as they keep going, until the buildings are much bigger than him and appear to hold up the sky. He grips onto George's hand.

"Excited?" he asks, bottom lip tugged between his teeth.

Dream wants to say yes, irrevocably so, but the apprehension is still swirling around in his mind.

"I'm nervous," he says, his free hand reaching to fiddle with the zippers on his bag. "And I'm tired, too."

George reaches past him to press a finger flat against the glass, and the tip of it turns white. "We're going somewhere over there," he says, as if it means anything to Dream. In the direction he's pointing, there are cloud shapes melting and bonding, visible over the labyrinthine sprawl of buildings. They sort of look like snow capped waves.

"Is it far?" Dream's limbs are heavy with lead.

He shakes his head. "Not really. Besides," he breaks off to smile, and Dream wishes he had a camera so he could savour it forever. "I'll just carry you if you pass out."

"Not likely. I'm like, a foot taller than you."

"A foot!"

So they have something to argue about until they reach the station. This one is so much bigger than Dream's used to, with multiple platforms and people far more important than he is walking around in ironed clothes. There are massive windows, much bigger than even the stained glass of the chapel at home. The floors are spotless under his feet when he gets off the train, and George's hand grips at his tightly so he won't wander off into the rush of people who know where they're going. He allows himself to be pulled. With wide eyes, and his heart beating fast.

Where George lives doesn't look as though it's been plucked straight from a book full of fairytale illustrations, but Dream feels like it has.

They find themselves on a street the same as all the others, but it's a different type of uniformity to how it is on the coast. By the sea, the streets are cobbled together in winding arcs which tangle together before sprawling out between hedgerows and wire-fenced fields. Each house is separated from the last. Sometimes they face directly at each other, so careless glances through the windows result in seeing things as unusual as the waves halting altogether. The sort of thing only the residents can see, since they're cursed to be there all the time.

In the city, the streets are straighter, the pavements longer, and the houses taller. They're narrower, with thin faces which cast the impression of intelligence rather than countryside isolation. Dream matches it to George no problem. George, with his sharp eyes and sharp features and sharp mind, honed to a point by these streets in the time he's been away.

Of course, he had to be a knife to begin with. George always had thorns, but they're much more noticeable now that he's grown pretty petals to contrast them to.

He can't stop himself from staring at just about everything as they're walking, so much so that George ends up several paces ahead more often than not, with an amused smile pulled across his face. Each time it happens, he waits with his hair shifting in the breeze and the sunlight smudging his features to be softer than usual.

Dream apologises, but continues to gaze at the potholes, the trees, the loose paving stones marked imperfect by yellow spray paint. It's a caution, he knows. But he steps on all of them anyway, because they rock back and forth in a motion reminiscent of the sea. Then he's looking at the rows of panes adorned by plant boxes, the strange grates covering windows positioned below street level, steps leading up to each door in varying degrees of deterioration, cars lined up tight beside the curb. They're more modern than they are at home. He's hit with the strange thought that their town is stuck in a different decade, with an invisible dome over it to protect it from the outside.

And they're the ones who managed to escape.

Before he can entertain that as much as he would like, he notices George is ahead once more. He rushes forwards, and this time their fingers intertwine when he catches up.

George grips back. He doesn't fall behind again.

"Here," George says when they're outside one of the houses. The only thing that breaks the monotony is the colour of the door, different to the ones either side of it. Until he looks closer, and notices the skew of the letterbox, the chipped paint at the bottom panel which denotes where its inhabitants kick at the surface. The cacti in the front window, resilient enough to survive with minimal care. On the first floor, the blinds pulled over the window have some of their slats missing, so Dream guesses whoever stays there isn't the most careful about letting the sun in each morning. There are photo frames turned backwards to him so he can't see their contents, but if he could, he's sure they would reveal a great deal more about how much this house differs to the ones either side of it.

As he's piecing together these fragments to create a full image, Dream realises he doesn't know all that much about George's second life. The one without him in it. Asking seemed like it would end in a storm brewing in the centre of his chest, composed of affirmations that George can survive without him, even though the same can't be said about Dream. So he simply didn't. Now, he feels like he's been kicked in the stomach, and acid singes the base of his tongue.

"Do you live with many people?" Dream is counting the window panes in his head as an attempt to figure it out.

"Just a few mates." There are keys swinging from George's index finger, and he's climbing the stairs to the door. Stairs with uneven caps, stairs Dream isn't acquainted with just yet. He's apprehensive about trusting them with his weight.

"Are any of them here?"

"Uh, probably not. It's summer," the door opens when George kicks the corner of it, and the hinges protest as he shoves it out of the frame.

"*Probably not?*"

"Well, I don't know," George huffs, turning back around to face Dream with his arms crossed over his chest. "It's not like I've asked them."

"You are *so* terrible at keeping in touch."

"I noticed."

Once Dream's kicked his shoes off in the entryway, George decides to give him an impromptu tour of the house.

There's nothing spectacular about it. Dream loves it anyway. He doesn't feel like he's being watched in this house, and perhaps that's because its inhabitants are a handful of twenty-something year old uni students, but he breathes easier when he's walking around it. Even tiny details, like the black stains adorning the grouting, or the cobwebs tucked away into dark corners, seem perfect to him. The cupboards are full of mismatched mugs and there's a green plate left on the draining board.

It's a household. Like a real household, with magnets stuck to the fridge and a rug between the sofa

and the TV and multiple scents twisting together in the way they do when their owners are comfortable with each other. It's a household, and it doesn't have an alpha omega couple at its hearth.

"What do you think?" George asks sarcastically. In his hands is a dustpan, and there's a house spider skittering around upon the plastic. His nose wrinkles.

"I love it," Dream says, and he's not lying.

"You love it."

"Yes! I'm being serious."

"What sold it to you?" George asks as he cups the spider with one palm and crosses the room to toss it out of the window. "The bin that's been left there for a month? The single glazing? It gets fucking freezing at winter, trust me."

"No, it's just..." Dream feels stupid for being so amazed by everything. For staring out of the train windows as though it was his first time leaving the town, for walking down the road with footsteps lighter than usual, for entering George's *home* and feeling something click into place within his heart. "It's nice," he settles on.

"Okay," George says, unconvinced.

"I mean like, there's nobody here. Well, I guess there's a few million people here really, but they're not looking at us. They don't care."

George smiles as if he knows—he most likely does, since he's had years and years to decipher what Dream means even when he can't find the right words for it. "They don't," he says. "Your parents aren't here, nobody from the town is here to look down their noses at you because they're used to you being four feet tall."

"Yeah, exactly. I guess I can see why you didn't want to go back," Dream admits. "Feels too good. I could just kiss you on the sofa with the door open and it's fine."

"Do it."

"What?"

George discards the dustpan and climbs over the arm of the sofa to settle upon the cushions, the curve of his spine fitting the impression like a puzzle piece. His hands pat the spot next to him, and his smile is a honey pot. Sweet, addictive. Dream can't help himself from moving forward until he's sitting next to George, and pulling George onto his lap instead, and tilting his head to the side so he can slot their lips together, and pushing his hands up against the bumps of George's ribs.

They kiss like that for a while. The world continues to flow on around them, and they only move out of the living room when George's shirt has been lost somewhere over the other side of the room so that the passersby would see his bare torso if they were to cast a haphazard gaze through the window. Without speaking, they agree that it would be a good idea to take their ministrations somewhere more private.

So Dream allows himself to be led upstairs, uncaring when they creak every now and again. It's not like there's anyone around to scold him for it.

He soon discovers the handle attached to George's door needs a good jiggle to open. George curses

under his breath before it eventually swings open, and he's drifting over the threshold with every nub of his spine sticking against his skin and old bruises littered across his shoulders. They'll be refreshed soon enough.

Normally, Dream would take the opportunity to cast his gaze around George's room, drink up the physical pieces of his soul with a parched tongue. But he's a little occupied by George's tongue in his mouth and the feeling of his mattress hitting his back as he's pushed down onto it. The air rushes out of his lungs, and his eyes slip shut. As a result, he doesn't have time to enjoy the computer science books piled up on George's shelf, or the desk sitting underneath it with an old jam jar as a pen pot, or the suncatcher Dream gave him when they were kids strung to the curtain rail.

They don't have sex in the traditional sense of the word. After a day of travelling and endings and beginnings, turning onto his front to allow George to open him up simply sounds too tiring to Dream.

Instead, he ends up with George sucking lazily at his neck, and his cock pushing through the tight gap between his thighs. It's slow, it's sleepy, it feels like the sun is setting even though the sky is cloudy blue outside George's window. A bruise blossoms over his scent gland. He pushes his face into the pillow when delicate fingers reach forward to wrap around his cock and coax him to a climax, before remembering there's nobody to hear through the walls and nobody to glare at the teeth imprints sprawling across his skin.

So the next time the head of George's cock brushes all the way along the underside of his own, he chokes out a moan unabashedly. The world is prettier after that.

Really, he would love to fuck George's thighs instead—the thought of all that pale flesh enveloping the length of him makes his teeth grit together and his stomach tighten—but he's apprehensive about asking him. George fucks him because it's easier. It's easier for Dream to be on the receiving end, since he's still coming to terms with liking omegas in the first place. He doesn't even know if George would want to reverse their positions. Not when his cock is closer in size to an alpha's, intimidating and thick and more likely to tip over the threshold into *pain* if used incorrectly. Perhaps it wouldn't end so well.

But fuck, Dream thinks about how George's hole would look stretched around him every so often, and ends up with a red cock, red cheeks.

He doesn't tell George the thought of fucking him into the mattress is what pushes him over the edge. White strings across his fingers, so pale the contrast isn't obvious. Before long, George arrives at the gate alongside him, and the gasp he releases next to Dream's ear sounds something like how he imagines anemones would sound if they had voices with which to sing.

Windflower.

Dream is left with cum dripping over his skin, blinking out of sight for seconds at a time as he struggles to hold his eyes open for more than a couple of heartbeats.

His consciousness is intermittent as George walks around the room, unbothered by the draughts wrapping around his exposed limbs. If he had more energy, perhaps he would seize the opportunity to trace his eyes over the fading scratches trailing from his shoulders to his hips, or the rainbow of bruises adorning his neck, his hips, his thighs, or the blush settling at his elbows. All evidence of how much time they've spent learning each other's bodies as if they were strangers again. As it is, Dream pushes his nose further into the sheets, and inhales the smell of pink rose.

George climbs into the space between his body and the wall. Their skin joins. The lightning is subdued for now, so Dream only feels the distant rumble of thunder each time George touches him for any amount of time.

“Sleepy?” George asks, reaching down to push his fingers through Dream’s hair.

After a day of traversing the country, walking down unfamiliar streets and up unfamiliar stairs, biting George’s pillow and allowing rose to swamp his senses, it’s all Dream can do to nod. He throws in a hum, but it sounds so exhausted all it does is make George giggle to himself.

“Sleep for a while,” he says, rubbing circles into Dream’s scalp. “Maybe we can go out later. If you’re not too tired.”

Dream wants to protest, wants to tell George napping now will knock his sleep schedule out of sync with his circadian rhythm, but nothing comes out when he opens his mouth. The edges of his vision dim. Lulled by the pressure of George’s skin to his, it’s far too easy to drift away from the shore, the comforting hum of the thunder to keep him company even in the stormiest of dreams.

The lighthouse guides him back to land later that evening, but Dream wakes up to an empty bed and cooling sheets.

Through the wall, he can hear the hum of the pipes below the sound of shower water and George singing to himself under his breath. It’s tempting to roll out of bed and join him. But if George knew he was awake, he’d surely stop humming and fall into silence instead. So he stays put. With the lingering smell of roses and morning dew floating in a cloud around him, Dream doesn’t have so much of an issue with pushing his nose further into the pillow and allowing it to overwhelm him for a while longer.

He remains like that for sixty-five seconds, but then his skin begins to itch. Like he’s fallen into a patch of thistles. He tosses one way, tosses the other when it proves to be ineffectual. No matter how far he shoves his face into the bed, Dream feels like he can’t be close enough to the smell of roses, and his nerve endings burn as he wraps his legs around one of the pillows and clutches it tight.

After a moment of deliberation, he’s pulling the sheets up over his head too. Finally, the itch ceases to scream at him. It continues to eat away at something in his core, but the feeling of George’s scent surrounding him with loving arms seems to subdue it, if even for a moment.

“What are you doing?” George asks when he returns, each syllable pitching up into his soft register. Dream must look like a fool, with blankets bunched around his oversized form and George’s pillows pulled close to his body.

“Nothing.”

“Sure.” Even with his vision obscured, George’s movements are easy to trace as he walks around, marked by the floorboards creaking under his weight. His footsteps come to a halt. “Do you want to go out tonight?”

“Like a date?” Dream asks sarcastically.

“If you want it to be.”

His jaw remains open for a moment before he remembers to close it. Truthfully, Dream doesn’t think he’s ever felt so energised after sleeping through the better part of an afternoon—whenever he’s woken up to a darkening sky before, his limbs have felt as if filled with lead, his tongue wrinkled in his mouth. But this time, it’s as if he’s touched a livewire. Beneath his skin, electricity buzzes with no means to escape, excitement pushed to the very tips of his fingers by his heart. With each mouthful of petals he inhales, the more it intensifies.

“Okay.”

“You’re going to have to get up, in that case,” George says, words punctuated by the opening of his wardrobe and shuffling fabric.

“But you smell good,” he blurts. His cheeks darken.

“Oh really?” The floorboards creak again, and there’s a delicate sort of amusement lacing his voice. “You know, I imagine the real thing’s better than my fucking bedsheets, Dream.”

“Whatever,” he says, but he’s pushing the covers out of his face anyway.

For a few seconds, his eyes struggle to adjust, pupils contracting as the lilac lampshade hanging from the ceiling throws light at him. Then he blinks, and his breath catches in his throat.

George has short sleeves, the skin of his arms marred with dark freckles every now and again. But that’s not what Dream notices. He notices what George is wearing on his legs, because it’s a fucking skirt, and the hem of it shows off far too much for Dream to really look at without wishing to stick his head under it. George is facing away from him as if it’s nothing. Like he does this every Tuesday—toes flexing against the floorboard without a care in the world.

“That’s, um,” Dream’s lips form around nothing, voice dead on his tongue. He wants nothing more than to reach forward and grab handfuls of George’s thighs, press his thumbs into the bruises left upon his skin.

“Hmm?”

“I’ve never seen you...wearing anything like that.” At home, George looked as if forged from sunset air and the dark spaces between the constellations, but he’d never looked quite like this. With a hemline precariously close to his ass, legs stretching in two columns of blue-veined marble. He’s pulling nylon over his shins now. He stands up from the edge of the bed in one fluid motion. The seam runs from his heels to the backs of his thighs before disappearing under the skirt, and Dream aches to sink to his knees and trace the line with his teeth, tugging George’s skin free of the fabric once he reaches the top so he can run his tongue along it. Perhaps shift around to his front and close his lips around the head of his cock. George’s fingers feel wonderful in his hair, and his cock feels even better when it’s hitting the back of Dream’s throat and coaxing wetness over his eyes, so he thinks the bruised knees would be worth it.

George’s words come as something akin to fingers clicked rapidly in his face. “Well, I couldn’t exactly wear stuff like this in the village. It’s a little revealing.” He flips the back up with one hand so Dream is graced with the sight of his ass for a second, before it falls back into place.

“A little.”

“Stop staring,” George mutters as he sits in front of his window and peers into the square mirror propped against the glass, a tube of gloss held between his thumb and forefinger.

“Really?”

George rolls his eyes at him through the reflective surface. “No, not really. You’ve seen a lot more of me than this—look as much as you want to.”

And who is Dream to resist an offer like that?

From his place in the middle of the bed, Dream watches George assemble himself with practised strokes and sharp hands. Streetlight replaces sunlight, exactly the same as it does at home. Perhaps that’s the most surprising thing about the city—how the moon still slides into the sky, and the clouds pulse and waver, rain heavy within their grasp just how he’s used to. Even though it feels like they’ve travelled a light year from home, the distance isn’t so vast after all. Dream’s world expands, and the iron bands constraining him seem to snap off one by one as he watches George rub something sticky and dewy over his face to blur the imperfections.

“Are you getting up?” he asks once he’s done, spinning around to face Dream. His face doesn’t look so different, but his shoulders sit higher and his breath comes easier. His neckline exposes the pink blossom on his neck, both of his nature and of Dream’s frantic lips.

Dark clouds eat at the corner of his mind. “I don’t have anything to wear.”

“You brought clothes, didn’t you?”

He sighs. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t.” George crawls onto the bed and settles with his knees on either side of Dream, before leaning forward to rub his nose over his scent gland. It causes his blood to roar in his ears. His cock stirs as the smell of George settles into his skin and he comes to the abrupt realisation there’s not so much separating them right now. Only the comforter, really. The skirt rides up George’s thighs to reveal more, more, and Dream wants to kiss him until he drowns and stay here, rather than losing himself to Atlantis.

“Well, you’re pretty,” he tries, shifting under the covers, “it’s not very fair.”

“You’re pretty.”

If Dream had to pick a word to describe his response to that, it would be *incredulous*. “I’m just me.”

“Yeah. And I fucked you plenty of times, didn’t I?” George’s lips ghost over his ear, voice tipping into the deep end. “I fell in love with *you*.”

Maybe it’s the way his mind is drifting somewhere outside his body, but Dream replies, “I believe you,” and for the first time, really does.

George kisses him then, but leans back after a heartbeat. “Go brush your teeth, fucking hell.”

He ends up having to ask George for a spare toothbrush, because somewhere in the flurry of running away from the place he’s called home all twenty years of his life, Dream’s managed to leave half the things he needs on the bathroom sink. George calls him a *fucking idiot*, but manages to find one anyway. And Dream smiles at himself in the mirror until the corners of his mouth hurt, skin buzzing, heart full of helium as he listens to the thrum of the city just outside the window.

They end up in a place with too many bodies crammed between the walls. It's a few streets and a tube ride away from George's front door, and something about seeing so many people pass through the same stations with such different destinations in mind feeds the anticipation burning in his stomach. Platform edges painted yellow are reminiscent of cliff precipices, but at the same time not at all. There's a sea of people rather than a sea of water. Although Dream should feel the weight of all those eyes settling upon his shoulders, he doesn't find it so different from the hypnotic pull of the waves, equally blind, equally massive, equally intangible.

Nobody here gives a *fuck* what they're doing, just like the water doesn't give much of a fuck if they kiss beneath its surface, so he holds onto George's hand tighter in order to keep from being swept away by the throng.

So there are too many bodies here, and too many drinks held in loose fingers, but he doesn't mind. His eyes flick back and forth across the lighting rigs, the bar tucked away into one corner, before gravitating back towards George's eyes. He's looking up at him like he's waiting for something. Dream doesn't have to ask what it is, since George's thumbs are hooking into his belt loops, and tugging him closer, closer, until his fingers are curled into the short hairs at the back of his neck in order to pull him downwards.

"Are you okay?" George says, voice raised over the music.

Lighting crackling across his skin, something fruit flavoured numbing his tongue, wrists thrumming with wild excitement. Dream nods, because of course he's okay. "It's..it's-" he tries, but he can't describe how his senses are knocked into overdrive and every touch makes him drunk.

"Have you noticed anything?"

"Noticed anything?"

"Yeah, about the people here."

So Dream turns to look.

George's hands are gripping his tight as he does it, as he looks at the tables and the people squeezed around them. They're holding drinks, some the same colour as water, some red, some orange, some an alarming blue shade which reminds him of the raspberry side of slush machines. His gaze stops on a couple attached at the lips, hands gripping each other's fingers. And it's only because he's looking for it that he notices the narrow waists, narrow shoulders, narrow wrists, non-abrasive scents curling together to create something like a bouquet. The next couple he sees is all petrichor and coffee granules. His nose wrinkles, but really he's happy about it, happy because this is a place where two alphas can hold onto each other in the open, uncaring of who might see. And as they look at each other with gentle eyes, the music fades under the pounding of his pulse.

“They’re like you,” he mutters, awed. But maybe that needs an amendment. “They’re like us.”

“I told you things were different in the city.”

Dream exhales, and out comes the last of the tension he’s been storing in his chest since he first entered their strange little town. Standing here with George pressed close to him and mirror shards shimmering over his skin, he feels as though perhaps he’s on a movie set too, his imperfections markers of his soul rather than damning. He breathes and breathes and breathes. And again, just to get used to the feeling.

“I don’t want to go home. Ever.”

George laughs, although it’s not malicious. His thumbs reach up to press into Dream’s cheeks, and their foreheads collide gently as the music wraps them tight with flowing soundwaves. Until they’re submerged—the most familiar thing in the world. Except this time the town doesn’t loom over them, a hundred windows with the lights off and the blinds closed, streets without names and lighthouses sleeping sentinels upon the coast. “You can stay for a while,” he says, breath hot against Dream’s lips, “but you’ll get used to it before long. And then you’ll miss the sea again.”

“So I’ll buy a second home,” he says, words garbled against the soft skin of George’s neck. “Go swimming on the weekends or something.”

“That’s not the worst idea you’ve ever had.”

“What’s the worst idea I’ve ever had?”

George takes a moment to think about it, before gazing up at him with deadpan eyes. “Probably sliding down the stairs in the fucking washing basket. That one was pretty bad.”

“You remember that?”

“How could I *not* remember that? I had to call the ambulance, dickhead-”

He’s cut off as Dream kisses him for the hundredth time today, chasing the taste of his glossed lips and the sugar sticking to his tongue. With all these people around, and bass reverberating in his core. His hands run over the tops of George’s thighs, squeezing and squeezing until George pushes him away with a half-hearted glare. Hair flying in every direction, mouth swollen and red. “You’ll get us kicked out if you keep that up.”

“Sorry.” He holds his hands up in surrender.

When George disappears into the darkness to retrieve more drinks for the pair of them, Dream thinks perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad. Getting kicked out, that is. Then they could climb beneath the covers, shed their clothes, breathe hotly into each other’s mouths, grind against each other and moan with wanton-

He stops when he realises he’s stiffening in his jeans. It’s hardly appropriate, but his skin’s been buzzing for hours and he can’t stop thinking about how George looks with his legs so perfectly displayed. Recently, Dream’s stopped fantasising so much about George like he did when he saw him sinking three fingers into his ass, most likely because he has the real thing all to himself now. But today he’s burning up, chasing his mind down winding lanes and countryside roads, allowing the thought of George’s hole swallowing his cock to plaster itself to his periphery.

Perhaps it’s all the adrenaline.

And he needs to stop, because there's slick collecting at his rim, and the tips of his ears have ignited, and George isn't here to press cold hands to his cheeks in order to combat the heat. Dream thinks very hard about burnt crusts, cold coffee, sea asters set down in the middle of the table. Dish soap running over his hands, microwave meals in front of the TV, glow in the dark stars, flickering street lamps, tidal hypnosis. Slowly but surely, his heartbeat begins to slow.

Just in time for George to reappear, a straw between his lips and hair pushed as though he's standing at the top of a cliff.

"You alright?" he says, voice drowning in music.

Dream takes his drink from George's other hand. It tastes of something he can't quite put a finger on, but at least it's nothing like blood orange. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're like, red."

With shifting light flowing over his skin, Dream has to wonder how George noticed. "How can you tell?"

A roll of his eyes. "It's how you smell, idiot. Like you're thinking about things you shouldn't be."

Dream's gaze dips lower, lower, until it's coasting over that dreaded hemline of his. He knows the heather intensifies when he does it, because George's eyes are spinning upwards again, and he's leaning forward to press his face into the crook of Dream's neck. His shoulders rise when he inhales. "You're so insufferable," he says after a moment, muffled by sun-spotted skin. "I fucked you earlier."

"Yeah, but then you put *that* on."

"You're like a teenager."

"Well, sorry. I'm only twenty."

"Mmmm, that's true." George's teeth scrape along the junction between his neck and jaw, and the knot settled in his stomach tightens. "I guess I was pretty bad when I first came here."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Suddenly there were plenty of people I wanted to fuck who wanted to fuck me back," he says, eyes full of the coastal constellations he's brought from home. "It was...an interesting year."

"That must've been nice," Dream says genuinely, because George looks at him just the same as sailors look at their sailboats, composed of familiarity as gentle as the water against the hull.

"Being a teenager was confusing. Well, I guess you know that."

"I think so—like you're waiting for everything to be like it is in movies, but it never happens. And you feel like you're living half a life."

"Just like that," George says.

"I feel full now," he confesses, a hand over his heart to keep the violent happiness from spilling out of his chest. It's blue and all consuming—blue for the sea, the sky, the colour which composes the most vast entities in their world. He wants to tear it apart with his bare hands at this moment, for he has no outlet for the force brimming in his head, and only shoving entire segments of the sky into

his maw could possibly be enough to satiate it. He wants to gorge himself on life. Until he's bursting at the edges.

"Me too."

Green, blue, red drips from George's smile, fluid over the ebb and flow of his shoulders, his collarbones, the pale stretch of his neck. Meadows, blood sunrise, ocean. Except it's not the same colour as the fields, or the sea, or the sky in the early throes of dawn, because this kind of light is artificial rather than forged at the far reaches of the country. This light is entirely different, socialised rather than hewn from raw earth. But George looks perfect under it nonetheless, with his hands trailing over Dream's hips and his eyes blurring out of focus as intoxication drips into his stomach.

With so much of his skin bathed in light, Dream can't squint his eyes and pretend George is an alpha. Before, he could do it if he tried. He could sour the roses in his head, he could trick himself into believing George's flesh wasn't soft enough to mark with even the faintest impressions of his teeth, he could twist himself into thinking George was just like an alpha when he was fucking him hard. But now, there's no two ways about it.

And yet-

Dream is struck with the realisation he would do anything to have George to himself.

Forever.

He doesn't convey this by leaning forward to cradle George's jaw with both hands, attaching their lips in the sort of storybook way that says *you were made for me and I was made for you*, because they're surrounded by damp skin and delirious smiles. The air buzzes, and Dream isn't used to that. And perhaps his adrenaline rush is finally catching up to him, because he's used to simpler things, such as the swell of the wind, and the omnipresent pull of the tide, and the promise of rain hanging over a village that desperately needs to be washed from head to toe. So he doesn't tell George about it just yet, since hot air clouds their minds. Aches spread across his soles. From the tips of his fingers to deep within his core, his muscles burn with exertion—no amount of swimming at dawn could've prepared him for how exhausting a thing as large as the city is.

"I want to go home," he says.

"Home?" George's eyebrow quirks upwards.

"Not to the sea. I mean I want to get out of here."

"Are you sure? It's still early—"

"Please," he begs, fingers curled around George's wrists. With the whirlpool in his chest and the electricity under his skin, the lights are becoming unbearable, and each pulse of the speaker stack makes him worry that his heart will fall into the wrong rhythm. *I can finally say it back.* "I just want to hold you."

The thorns lingering in George's gaze dissolve. "Sure," he says, already turning towards the exit. "There's always tomorrow. And the day after, and the day after, and—"

"The day after that," Dream finishes with a laugh.

It's not as though they have expiration dates. They have years and years to figure out how each gear of the city clicks, so he doesn't need to rush to do it right now. For the time being, it's okay to

fall into the centre of George's bed and sleep, it's okay to do nothing at all because the world will still be there when he wakes up.

The planet has several billion years until it's vaporised by the sun.

Daybreak comes around every morning.

Daybreak is further than he thought.

While the weight of his limbs suggests the sky should be pink by the time they're back outside, Dream is surprised to find it midnight black. That doesn't mean the city is asleep. Instead of dormant streets and sea-worn bodies tucked under thick blankets to stave off the chill which invades rural areas, there are slanted rectangles of light pouring out of every other window. There are silhouettes moving at the same pace as they would during dawn. The hum of car engines, the blaring of taxis ferrying people with red cheeks to places Dream may never see.

So he's not expecting the underground platform to be quiet, much less the tube when it arrives (more frequently than twice a day), but it is. They stand anyway, and Dream watches George's hair fly in the tunnel draught. It's plenty long enough to do that now.

Station after station, each of them marked with red circles, a blue bar running horizontally to denote each peculiar name. Pillars holding the ceiling above their heads, metres of earth stretching to the ground. Dream isn't claustrophobic. But it's unnerving nevertheless, to think about steps drilling down into the depths, about the decomposition that happens parallel to where they stand. Tunnels lying beneath streets like shed snakeskins.

He murmurs into George's ear as the lights fade, swell, fade, swell. As the carriages clatter together. Sometimes George laughs at what he says, and even in the dimness of the underground, Dream can't stop himself from feeling as if the sun's rising.

At one of the stations, there's a group of alphas waiting on the platform. Dream doesn't know they're alphas yet. He knows when the doors slide open and the smell of wet tarmac, chimney smoke, engine oil tumbles in right alongside them. It's much stronger than he's used to. His nose wrinkles of its own accord. George pulls him further into the corner when they settle nearby, feet on seats and voices loud enough to slice over the sound of the train despite its whirring and humming and groaning.

But as he continues to talk to George, he can't shake the feeling he's being watched.

As though to confirm his suspicions, George's eyes harden, and his smile flatlines. He holds on tight to Dream like he's one of the poles connecting the roof of the carriage to the floor, bolted there to grab when it becomes too difficult to balance. He's looking at Dream more often than not. But every so often, his gaze flicks over his shoulder, and his head tips surreptitiously to one side.

"What's up?" he asks, although it's rhetorical. He's hoping George will ease the knot in his stomach.

“Just,” George begins, before trailing off. “Just keep talking?”

“Okay.”

The next time he falls silent, he swears he hears the word *omegas*, from behind him, and his pulse jumps in his wrist. Whether it’s because he’s nervous or enraged, Dream isn’t sure. Nervous, because he doesn’t like to be looked at for too long, particularly not by strangers—as if he’s being appraised. Enraged, because he has fucking ears and he’s standing right here.

One look at George’s face confirms he’s tipping towards the latter end of the spectrum, with a set jaw and defiance flaring in his eyes.

Then there’s a laugh, grating against his nerves, and one of the strangers says, “they’re fucking zeroes,” louder than everything else as if they *want* to be heard.

Zero. Dream isn’t sure what it means, but it makes his stomach roil and sweat bead along the back of his neck. He has this sense that it’s something bad, even if he isn’t entirely sure why. And they’re talking among themselves again like nothing’s happened, voices lowered once more so he can’t pick out the words over the humming of high voltage lines.

George becomes very quiet after that.

His eyes blink shut for an elongated second, and the air rushes out of his lungs in a sharp exhale. For a moment, Dream thinks he’ll whip around and confront them, because his hands are shaking where they’re bunched into fists, but instead he stares at the door and pretends as if they don’t exist. As though he’s done this a thousand times before.

They approach the next station. It’s still a stop away from where they need to go, but George is pulling Dream towards the door anyway, fingers constricting tighter and tighter around his wrist as the floor continues to tip them back and forth. Too measured to be anything like the sea.

“Don’t we need to-” he begins, but his voice dies upon his tongue when George turns back to him with eyes that say *quiet*.

So he follows George out of the train, into a station he doesn’t recognise that manages to look the same as all the others regardless. Identical steps, identical tunnels, identical stench of damp and grime and tobacco. They walk through it with footsteps that echo off the tiles and tense silence stretching between them. Dream wants to ask what’s wrong. But George is pulling him towards the barriers where they stand like sentinels, much shorter than how the lighthouse stands against the sky.

No words are exchanged as they walk home. It begins to rain at some point, crystalline beading in the air with the orange lamplight catching in the facets of each drop.

George’s hair becomes slicked to his scalp. So does Dream’s. The slide of their palms turns wet where they’re joined, and dampness seeps beneath his clothes. At any other time, it would be unpleasant, but Dream’s skin is still burning despite the rush of the breeze around him, so the coolness of the rain is welcome.

Up the stairs, through the front door, into the hallway. The door closes too loudly. George hits a fist against the lightswitch, and now Dream can see how his lower lip trembles, how his skirt is sticking to his legs and how his shirt is see-through where the fabric is waterlogged. His hair is flattened, as though he’s just been swimming. He runs a frantic hand through it and strands stick up in every direction once more, curling at the ends already.

“George-”

“I’m sorry,” he says, syllables uneven. It’s the first time Dream’s heard him speak in a while.
“Now we’re fucking soaking, and we could’ve just *stayed*.”

“But it was upsetting you.”

“Yeah. That’s not your fault, is it?” George pulls at his hair, hard.

Without a word, he’s turning to run up the stairs, hand sliding over the banister to keep himself upright. Dream takes it as his cue to follow. Even if George is simmering with rage, he doesn’t seem annoyed with Dream, so he approaches the bottom step and winces when it squeals under his weight.

Once he gets to George’s room, he finds him sitting on the floor in front of the window, expression vacant as he stares at the wall. He’s never been quite so dejected. His fingers pick at the hangnails adorning his thumbs, and there’s skin peeling off his lip where he’s bitten it too hard, and the fabric covering his legs is all twisted.

Dream kneels in front of him.

For the first time, he’s not so sure whether the shine of George’s cheeks is due to the storm or something else entirely. It could be both. George is the centre of his world.

“What...” he peters off, the drip drip of rain from the end of a gutter when the storm’s receding.
“What did they mean?”

Zeroes.

Even thinking it makes his stomach lurch.

“What you have to understand,” George mutters, eyelashes dragging over his cheekbones and coming away slick with dewdrop tears. It’s terrifying, because Dream’s never seen him like this. Oak coloured irises, tears shimmering in the hollows which lead to the deepest parts of his soul. “Is that an omega’s worth is determined by their fucking alpha. And without alphas, what are we? To society, we are *nothing*.¹”

“Zero,” Dream breathes, wishing more than anything George would transform back into rose garden lips and pink lemonade cheeks.

“Yeah. It’s not very inventive, is it?”

“Do you get called that a lot?”

“Quantitatively speaking? Probably not. But it always feels like it’s *too fucking much* when it happens, because it shouldn’t happen at all.”

And because he’s never dealt with anything like this before, Dream doesn’t know what to say to that. Instead, he reaches forwards hesitantly, afraid George will snap at him. Bite his hand clean off. But he doesn’t protest when Dream tugs him into his arms, pulling closer and closer so he can hear the thump-thump of George’s heart against his own. As well as the tremble of his shoulders. Every quiver of his lips, every shake of his head as he attempts to stop himself.

“It was nothing, really. I shouldn’t be reacting like this,” he says, pushing the heels of his palms against swollen eyelids. “It starts to break you down after a while. Chip by chip, until you fall

apart. I'm so sorry.”

“Hey, it’s alright to cry—”

“No. I’m sorry you have to go through this too. I’m sorry you have to go through this for the rest of your life.”

Dream looks down at George, reduced to this version of himself by the murmurings of strangers in the middle of the night, when the tongue slips and everything is swept under the rug. It makes him angry. It makes him angry, because it’s nothing for those people to make whatever fucking snide comments they so desire, but it has this much of an effect on George, who’s kept a brave face for Dream the entire time just so that it might make it easier for him to come to terms with himself.

Now that version of George is cracking down the middle, and he’s left with this one, who reminds him too much of himself. And like he’s looking in a mirror for the first time in fifteen years, Dream can understand how it was to listen to him grovel and whine and self-pity when they were lying in bed together, bemoaning the universe they were born into as if either of them could do a fucking thing to change it.

Because they can’t. They just have to play the best they can with the cards they’ve been dealt.

All Dream can think is, *you stood in my bedroom and you looked me in the eye and you told me that what the world thinks omegas ought to be is all bullshit. So why do you care now?*

“Why do you care?” he says once he’s summoned his voice into its box. “If we’re nothing, we’re Nothing with fucking teeth. You just gotta bite back.”

George’s gaze flicks up. “You believe that now?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I really, really, do.”

“What changed?”

What changed?

Just about the equivalent of the sun imploding, Dream thinks. He can see more clearly now, without the waves numbing his mind halfway to death and the cliffs promising the means. He can see George crying in his arms because society’s told him he’s worth *Zero*. He can feel how his heart aches. His heart aches because George is in pain and there’s nothing he can do to stop it besides petting at his hair and whispering fallacies into his ear. The truth is harder, he knows, but it’s what they need to face.

It’s what he needs to finally fucking face.

“I’m so sure of it now. I fucking love you—not in a sex way, or in a confused teenager way. Well, I’m confused about everything else, but I know I’m not confused about this. You’re the only thing that makes sense right now. Even if nothing else does.”

“God, Dream.”

“What?”

George laughs, and the sound of it is full of seawater. His hands are against either side of Dream’s face, sliding into place like jigsaw pieces from the wrong puzzles. Different colours, different images, different people, but fitting together nonetheless. “That’s the first time you’ve said it,” he

breathes, and the corners of his lips tip upwards at last. “I want to be mad because now I have to be thankful to some assholes for the rest of my life, but I don’t think I am.”

“Sorry,” he says, subdued. “I love you.”

He kisses the space between George’s eyebrows.

“I love you.”

The tip of his nose.

“I love you.”

The petals of his lips.

He moves to pull away, but George is holding him fast, a fist gripping the front of his shirt. They breathe together, swallow all the words they don’t need to say in order to be understood. He’s been saved. With the rain wetting the slide of their lips, and saliva wetting their tongues, and the tang of George’s tears wetting the press of their cheeks to one another when they come up for air.

“Dream-”

George is unable to finish.

He tries again when Dream is breathing against his lips, foreheads pressed together, hot and cold. He’s clawing for the surface. And the burning is back in the centre of his mind now he’s certain that George is okay, and all he wants to do is kiss him halfway to the fucking grave, and he’s knotting his fingers into his hair, and he’s leaning in...

“Dream, *wait*,” George says, and the urgency in his tone finally forces Dream to pull away for a moment. Air floods his lungs, but his vision continues to swim and swim as if he’s got salt water in his eyes.

“Huh?” His chest heaves, but each gasping breath doesn’t taste of relief as it usually would. Instead, his pulse thrums in his wrists, and hot tar congeals in his veins. The corners of his vision spread out, oil spills in the centre of the road. And George looks pretty like this. All his sharp angles erased to leave behind sloping curves and long lines, skin glowing under the overhead light which catches upon the beads of perspiration forming at his corners. Dream wants nothing more than to take him upon his tongue.

“Your skin, it’s...” George’s hands are freezing against his cheeks. “You’re boiling.”

“It’s summer,” he offers.

“No, it’s like...” George’s hands jolt back all of a sudden, and Dream chases after the touch with a frown affixed to his lips. The coolness of them is comforting, in a way. He doesn’t understand why George is holding his palms in front of his face like he’s scalded himself.

“Like what?”

“Dream,” George says, sharpened to a needle point. “Did you bring suppressants?”

Suppressants.

Dream casts his mind to the depths.

Each morning, he wakes with George against his chest, dark eyelashes pressed firmly over his cheekbones and mouth popped open in mid-slumber. Then the sun creeps upwards in the sky, and paints the pair of them red, pink, magenta, gold. They lie like that for a while, perhaps they'll grind against each other until they're cumming over their stomachs, lackadaisical. Slick dripping between his thighs, time spilling through his fingers in white bliss. Once their hearts stop pumping at twice the speed they normally do and their fingers fall slack upon the sheets, Dream washes the sweat and the cum and the sleep from his skin in the shower, with the heat turned all the way up as though it'll scour the wrongdoing from his soul.

Then he re-enters his room with nothing but a towel to cover him, and tips a pill out of the orange bottle on his bedside. His throat bobs. He only knows because George stares at it every single time, gaze flickering over the bruises stamped up his neck. The bottle resounds dully when he sets it down. After that, they walk to the beach with their fingers linked as soon as the town fades out of sight.

But his nightstand is two hundred miles away. And the bottle is still on top of it, because Dream's so used to measuring his day in numbers and exhales and the movements of the second hand that remembering something like this has been left to drown in the oppressive storm that is seeing the streets that ripped George's chrysalis from his butterfly body. Feeling it do the same to him.

"I forgot."

George's eyes widen not in shock, but in the way they do when his suspicions are confirmed. His fingers are uncertain around Dream's wrists, the same manacles that chained him to the floor of the lighthouse and said he'd better be fucking serious about this, or the threads spooling between them would be irreparably severed. "When was the last time you took them?"

"I- I've been preoccupied the last few days," he says, mind moving along with his words. "I can't remember."

An exhale through his teeth. "I think your heat is starting."

"Oh."

Dream can't say much more, because there aren't any words left in his head.

"I- I have emergency suppressants," George says a mile a minute, rummaging around in his drawer to pull a needle free, the barrel full of liquid suppressant. Dream's only seen them in TV shows before, reserved for characters stupid enough to forget to take their fucking suppressants. The tip gleams in its protective tubing, and it's an easy out.

Dream swallows hard, and shakes his head.

At this moment, he makes a decision. The decision that he doesn't want to earmark every morning for the rest of his life with fear and orange bottles, especially when their contents work like cyanide against the soft lining of his stomach. They're poisoning him, he knows. He's fought his nature for years and years, and for once, he's tired of it.

He wants to drown, and drown, and drown. But breathe as he does it, for he was born with gills instead of lungs.

He just needs to take the plunge, get in the fucking washing basket and slide down the stairs until he cracks his head open upon the plant pot sitting at the bottom. It'll give him a good analogy a few years down the line, if nothing else.

“I don’t want to. Is- is that okay? I trust you so much. I...love you so much.”

Teeth, chewing at the soft skin of his lips. George looks frightened for once, and Dream thinks he’s had enough of wishing for him to be happy. “You realise, uh, if we have sex, it’ll probably trigger it right away?”

“I know,” Dream says, gripping onto both of George’s hands because he’s started to feel like he’s floating away from the surface. Bubbles in his blood, and no sign of a decompression chamber to fix it. “I don’t think I’ll ever be more ready than I am now. So fuck it.”

“Literally,” George says with a giggle.

Dream is impossibly, impossibly in love.

The room blurs until they’re on the bed, most likely creating a mess of the sheets due to the water dripping from their hair and leaking out of their clothes. Neither of them care. They drown each other in kisses, beginning slow every time only to escalate when teeth catch against delicate sections of skin and hands begin to wander over places reserved for themselves.

“Undress,” George says in between two. “You’ll boil to death if you don’t.”

The air is blissful against his skin when he takes his clothes off, seams cracking because he’s so frantic. There’s a sort of terror lacing his blood and marrow, a fear of unknown waters as they freefall together. He’ll be okay, he knows. George knows what he’s doing. But his hands shake with nervous anticipation as he’s pulling everything off his body to leave behind bare skin, his joints painted pink instead of cream like they usually are. His shirt ends up in a crumpled heap on the floor, before he’s reaching for George’s skirt to pull it right off his waist.

“Dream, careful,” George says breathlessly, lifting his hips so he can push it past his ass. “You’ll tear it.”

“Don’t care.”

He reaches for the tights next, although a part of him wants to rip them open in the back and take George like that. The backseam just looks so perfect, running up the length of his legs in one fluid arc. But he takes his time to slide them off anyway. And once they’re discarded over the edge of the bed, he leans down to mouth over the outline of George’s cock through his underwear.

“Are you going to take those off?” George asks from somewhere above his head.

He casts his gaze upwards to be graced by the sight of each one of George’s ribs cupping the light as he pulls his shirt over his head with crossed arms. The indentations are clear against his skin when pulled taut. Then his arms drop, and the slight softness covering his stomach falls back into place. Pillow-like. Dream thinks he’ll kiss there next.

“I thought you said it’s best not to rush.”

“Uhuh.” Pale fingers thread through the red strands of his hair. He’s reminded of how whipped cream looks, melting into strawberry jelly. “But heat kind of makes that go out the window.”

Dream’s lips twist together. “I don’t feel too weird. Just like, really turned on, but that’s just like normal. And my skin’s sort of hot, and there’s this itch somewhere but I can’t tell *where*,” he huffs, before hooking his thumbs into George’s waistband in order to free his cock. It’s hardening, but Dream spits into his palm and tugs at it in order to watch it flush morden red.

“Yeah,” George says after a gasp breaks upon his tongue. His hips grind up into Dream’s palm, chasing the feeling of a thumb glancing across the head every so often. “It’s pretty obvious when it starts. Like, *really* starts.”

Dream thinks about George in his position, whining into his bedsheets and curling his toes when nothing is ever enough. Somewhere in the middle of his dread, he wishes they could’ve started at the same time of month. Like he could ever command the moon.

Instead, he sits up to kiss George halfway breathless, giggling when he topples backwards to land on the pillows with a soft exhale. Then he’s leaning over him to do it again. Dream tethers him to the bed with fingers blossoming around his wrists as George knots his own in the red of his hair, thighs slotted together and skin warm in every place it connects.

Just the same as he does at daybreak, he grinds his hips in lazy circles, revelling in the sort of stimulation that isn’t overwhelming, but builds slow and sweet. The sort that feels nice for a while, and nothing more. All while he’s tasting George, swallowing up the noises of contentment he provides with a parched tongue desperate for oasis. Precum gathers at his slit and slick turns his thighs dewy, and he knows George is just the same because his rose smell is becoming stronger with every accidental scrape of tongue against teeth.

They wait for a while, kissing with hands which cease to wander just yet. At least not to where it matters. Dream can feel the press of George’s palms against his back, sliding over hot skin and leaving frost in their wake, and pale thighs wrap around him so that gentle stimulation gnaws at his cock. It’s more of an embrace, really. An embrace which moves at the same pace of the moon arcing through the sky.

Dream knows when something switches, because the energy eating away at his matter becomes unbearable, the corners of his vision reduce to white haze, and every brush of George’s skin to his is scalding. It’s terrifying, and he’s choking on air, scrambling to pull oxygen into his chest. He’s painfully hard against his stomach. His hands reach for George of their own accord, looping tight around his waist to pull him closer, to join all their limbs even if the slide is made sticky with excess perspiration.

Through it all, George shushes against the shell of his ear, and he rubs circles between his shoulder blades. Fingers connecting the sunspots into constellations, no need for a navigation since he’s memorised where every last one of them is. “You’re okay,” he breathes, all cold touches and the smell of home emanating from his neck. “The first time is scary for everyone.”

“Hurts,” Dream says intelligently.

“I know. Give it a minute, alright? Get used to it first.”

So they sit there for a while. George with his legs wrapped tight around Dream’s waist, Dream with his face pushed into George’s chest to block out the streetlight filtering through the curtains. George apologises over and over for it—he knows how even the smallest amount of light stings, how unfamiliar scents are unwelcome in the disorientation of heat. He holds Dream’s head close to him, so much so that the tip of his nose begins to ache. But it creates the same effect as wrapping himself tight with George’s bedsheets, until he’s the only thing he can smell with his raw sinuses, so he doesn’t mind.

Dream doesn’t count the seconds.

There’s not enough room in his head.

After an indeterminable amount of time, the nausea slips out of his stomach and into his navel, and slick is leaking out of him at a rate he would normally be embarrassed about. As it is, the wetness pooling beneath him is sort of an afterthought. He holds George tighter, eyes flying wide open when their lengths slide together and a gasp is punched out of George's lungs. Suddenly, he's struck with the realisation that if he doesn't cum pretty fucking soon, he'll lose his mind. All consuming.

Fuelled by the wet heat, the feeling of blood rushing downwards, the taste of George's skin beneath his tongue, Dream grasps at him with unseeing hands. He has no idea what part of George he's holding in order to anchor him to reality, since it's difficult to see straight with waves crashing over his vision. Warmed by summer, hypnotic and undulating.

"See what I mean?" George's voice is foggy in the midst of his head. The syllables are difficult to refine, so he instead relies upon the vibration of George's words in his throat.

"Mmhmm," he mumbles, lips pressed over where his larynx lies. The scrape of his teeth against delicate skin is addictive, and the pheromones calm the surface of his mind. Tea leaves, rain, roses.

"Flip over," he registers George saying, "I need to prep you."

That makes him lift his head, even as the room spins around him.

"Can I fuck you this time?" he begs, unashamed now that he's harder and wetter than he's ever been in his life. It's something akin to sipping vodka out the bottle, the white noise of the sea steepening the descent into too much honesty and a lack of embarrassment. So Dream asks, and George's brow furrows.

"Are you sure? Isn't it easier for you if I—"

"Please, please please," he babbles, leaning down to mouth over where George's mating bite would go. Even Dream can hear how wrecked his voice sounds. "Wanna fuck you so bad, I'm gonna die if I don't."

With his hands steadyng Dream's head, George waits a few seconds before nodding. "Okay," he says, gentle. "If that's what you want."

Dream watches in awe as George pulls his knees up to his chest to expose himself, hole shining with slick even in the dimness of the room. He leans down to lap at it in one smooth motion, teeth catching upon the rim for a split second. And George *chokes* on his air, chokes more when Dream's tongue pushes past the tight ring of muscle, delving further so he can taste rosemilk covering his tongue, beading at the back of it as he spreads George for himself. His thighs tremble. Dream thinks the splotches of heather covering them look better from down here.

The way in which he preps George isn't a practised thing—he's only ever done it to himself before, and he's not used to the switch of angle, or the way he has to study George's face in order to tell what feels good. On top of that, his heat worsens with every second spent with his cock untouched. So even as he's pushing his fingers in after his tongue, Dream ruts against the sheets until they crumple around his hips. George's hand knots in his hair. In an effort to distract himself from the unbearable ache wrapping around his middle, he funnels his concentration into stretching, and prodding, and searching—

He knows he's found it when George grips at his hair tighter, hard enough that he swears crimson vines push right through his scalp and wrap around his brain. It stings, but he looks up just in time to watch as brown irises roll back to expose the whites, lips flying open in a silent gasp. Dream

brushes against George's prostate again. When it makes his thighs shake and his lips quiver, he knows he's reached fucking heaven. George is so responsive to him, reacting as if struck by lightning every time Dream thrusts his fingers into exactly the right place, whined gasps falling over his lips one after another because he hasn't been touched like this in a while and everything must feel so much better.

Or perhaps it's just the catharsis that comes attached to doing all of these things with *Dream*.

"Your fucking fingers," George stutters, gaze unfocused. "'s good."

Perhaps Dream would be able to formulate a better response if he weren't halfway to incoherency. "Can I fuck you?" is all he can come up with, vision accursed with stars every time he rolls his hips into the mattress. He's breathing through gritted teeth, hissing with every brush of cotton to his oversensitive head. He wants to be *inside*.

"Yeah, you can," George says, but it comes out as more of a plea. He's crying, Dream realises. There are dewdrops rolling over his cheeks to collect at the corners of his lips, the point of his chin, the divots of his collarbones. He's crying, with huge wet eyes and a face flushed pink. "Just —try and go slow, okay? God, you're fucking big, don't push in all at once."

Dream's never fucked anyone before. There aren't too many alphas who'll let their mates fuck them, much less omegas they don't know. So he tries to copy how George does it, as he guides the head of his cock to George's rim, every nerve ending buzzing with desperation. George sinks in slow, inch by inch with his gaze attached to Dream's face.

In George's bed, with George's sheets and George's pillows, Dream tries to do the same. He watches George's hole swallow him a little at a time, pausing for a minute whenever George's gasps verge on the brink of pain. Then he squeezes around him, and Dream resumes. It takes him a while to approach the base, but George whispers over and over that he's doing good, that he's bigger than he's ever had, and that makes the wait entirely worth it.

Dream pushes his hips tight against George's ass, and he's drowning. He's drowning, but breathing lungfuls of water. And it's right.

It's so right.

As his chest heaves, eyes staring off at some point in the middle distance as if he can see all the way to heaven itself, Dream realises he's never felt so full to the brimming in his life. He's in the throes of heat, and there's no other thoughts plaguing his mind besides the way George feels around him, hole gripping his cock tight and wet and hot. Skin pressed to his, rose and heather. Pink, purple, bruises, bites.

It's right.

"Go, you can go," George mutters, fingernails tearing into Dream's skin to leave behind red half moons.

He draws out a little at first. That's what George does to him. Gentle thrusts to begin with, building in intensity as the slide becomes wetter and more desperate. It's more of a rocking motion for now, but Dream's stomach is on fire and every ridge of George against his cock makes him want to drown himself in the rain. Lightning flickers over his vision, a conjecture of his mind.

"It's good, isn't it?" George asks, a wry smile pulled over his lips.

Good is something of an understatement.

George is gripping him, so tight it's mind-numbing. His hole sucks Dream in again and again, and although it's hot, the heat of it doesn't overwhelm him in a negative way. Instead, he's chasing for more, until he's thrusting harder into George, aiming for his prostate with each one because he wants to ensure George feels good too.

"Fuck," George gasps, and he knows he's got it. He drives into it relentlessly, only slowing when George's words become a slew of *closecloseclose* in rapid succession. "You're so big," he whines while Dream's grinding into him once more, disgruntled at being denied his orgasm.

"Really?"

"Uhuh. I can feel you here." George sets a hand flat on his stomach, and it makes Dream's mind ignite.

"Holy fuck," he struggles.

George is looking at him again, although it's difficult to decipher his expression with the way reality bends around him. Like he's on the beach with a bottle of vodka again, everything moving in slow motion as the alcohol settles into his mind and convinces him the waves are miniature horses racing up the beach. "You like that, don't you? You like being bigger than me."

"So pretty," he agrees, beginning to thrust again.

He's being tugged downwards, George's breath hot against his ear as he murmurs one simple command: "fuck me, and don't stop this time."

Reality slips out from under his feet after that. Swept away, another piece of driftwood tossed about far too easily. His mind is rounded in the same manner sea glass is, and there's nothing left but how George tightens around him, how George whines with every brush against his prostate, how he *screams* every time Dream targets it head-on.

When they near the edge, he's not sure how long he's been fucking George up the mattress, bedsheets thrown somewhere onto the floor and the headboard knocking against pre-existing dents. It could've been five minutes. It equally could have been hours, for there's so much electricity pulsing over him all at once that he's unsure how his body is able to withstand it.

George cums first. Opalescent white strings over his stomach, sticking to the head of his cock as he's coaxed through each wave of it.

The feeling of him tightening around his length is what Dream needs to push him off the cliff and send him plummeting into the deep end.

It's different from every other orgasm in his life. This time, he's spilling into George. It tears through him with enough force to turn his vision white for a second, heart stopping in his chest as the world slows down. Wave after wave, each more bruising than the last.

His vision returns in pieces, some more important than others. The itch continues to thrive under his skin, screaming at him to...do something, to lean forward and mark George as his own forever. That's what happens now, his body screams. But he knows it won't work, for George is an omega, and so is he, and it doesn't matter how much they want it because their code wasn't written in a favourable way.

In a moment of desperation, he takes George's scent gland between his teeth, and bites.

There's nothing which suggests the universe clicks into place. The earth doesn't stop spinning. The

sun doesn't stop setting. He's sinking further into his skin, tears welling in his eyes as George clutches at the bedsheets in desperation. Gasps spill from his lips, each one toeing the line between pain and pleasure because Dream's mouth tastes metallic now, and their blood should be fusing together, and their scents should be intertwining, but they're *not*. George still smells like roses. Dream still smells like heather.

"Dream, too much," George cries after a moment.

As he pulls away, guilt swirls in his stomach—through the blurriness of his vision, he can see George's eyes watering and angry red marks creating a sketchy oval. Just as Dream can never cleave chunks from the sky and shove its orange into his mouth, he can never make the mark on George's neck scar over. It's deeper this time, so perhaps it'll take weeks to fade instead of days. But it'll vanish just the same.

"I'm sorry," he mutters. His thumb presses at the bite, and George hisses. "I wanted it to work, somehow."

"It'll never work. That's okay."

"I wanted it to be permanent," he says, glaring down at his hands through the static haze filling his head. It's cruel, because despite the disappointment flooding over his limbs, Dream continues to drip slick across his inner thighs, onto the sheets, and his cock presses pink against his stomach.

George sits up, cupping his face. He kisses him once, twice. "It'll fade in a week or two."

"Don't remind me."

"No, listen. Then you can do it again. And again, and again, and again. You can do it every day, if you want. You can tattoo your fucking name across it, if you want, but you'll have to leave it alone while it heals."

Dream considers taking George's skin between his teeth and tasting roses every morning. While the sun's on its way up. A lifetime of claiming him, over and over and over again so it'll never fade. Until the sun vaporises the planet, and daybreak ceases to dawn.

Blood dripping over his skin, as if he's grasped the wrong part of a rose stem and pricked his fingers.

"You look like you've been mauled," he says.

George seems relieved to laugh. "Yeah, it fucking hurt."

"I'm sorry."

"It hurt in a good way," he amends, gaze flickering between Dream's eyes and lips. "You know like how jumping off the cliff is fucking scary? But it's a good scary, the scary that shocks you into feeling like you've never been more alive. That's how it feels."

Of course he knows.

"God, I fucking love you."

"Me too. But tell me again," George says, leaning forward so their lips move against each other. His eyes merge into one, and it looks so dumb Dream has to close his own in order to keep himself from giggling. "Tell me again when you're not grinding against my thigh, okay?"

“Sorry,” he mumbles, red and pink and rose.

“Shut up and kiss me.”

The next few hours are happier. He spends it learning George over and over, learning how best to time the drive of his cock into his ass in order to make him see God himself. He learns how George’s eyes roll up when he’s close to the edge, and his shoulders come off the mattress as he grasps at anything he can get his hands on. He learns that George prefers being fucked, because he likes being pushed over the edge and further, tears gathering in his eyes when Dream keeps going despite the cum streaked across his stomach. Until he’s gasping for him to stop, and he does in an instant.

It could be minutes, hours, or days by the time they fall still.

They lie together in the sunrise, curtains tinted pink by the clouds of the hour. George’s bite wound is healing over, newborn skin knitting together to create a fairy ring of redness. Their skin is sticky, but the sheets are worse. There’s an ungodly amount of mess surrounding them, and Dream feels like he’s at the tail end of a cold, when he can finally get up from his bed and walk around but there’s still a funny taste lingering at the back of his mouth.

“Feeling better?” George asks, fingernails running along his scalp.

“Is it over?”

“Hmm, maybe. It’s been a while.”

Dream doesn’t want to ask how many times the sun’s risen while he’s been like this. It’s a lot of sex, only punctuated by George walking out of the room with his ass on display to fetch food for the both of them. There’s not much point in putting clothes on. Dream would just tear them right back off every time he returns.

“I feel like...I’ve had enough sex to last the next decade.”

George laughs into his pillow, shoulders shaking even as the sound of it is muffled. When he emerges, his hair is tousled, and he’s far more beautiful than the daybreak. “We’ll see about that tomorrow, huh? I have a feeling you’ll *recover* pretty fast.”

“I like that,” he says. “Tomorrow. Makes me think I have all the time in the world.”

“You do. If you want. You don’t have to go home.”

A groan forces its way out of his lungs as he rolls over to situate himself a little better. His cock presses against the sheets, but it’s been soft for a while and the stimulation doesn’t do much more than create a meagre amount of pressure. “What about your friends? I can’t just stay here.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. What if they hate me? What if they hate *us*? ”

Soft lips dance over his collarbones, past the kisses stamped across them for the next few days to come. “They’re not going to hate you,” George reassures, and just like always, his voice is as flat as the seawater on a calm day. “They’re definitely not going to hate us. Do you really think I would choose to live with people who weren’t okay with me?”

“I guess not.”

“Yeah, idiot. So stay here.”

Dream thinks about the underground, and the mismatched plates, and the music they play in the bar. Most of all, he thinks about all the streets he hasn’t seen at all yet, the ones he has yet to explore. With George’s hand in his. If he has any say in the matter.

“I’ll stay here,” he agrees. “Life has a funny way of working itself out, right?”

“It always does.”

It’s a Saturday, and the sun is climbing to its apex in the sky. From where he stands on the street, Dream imagines he can hear the bobbing of the boats in the harbour, the scream of gulls landing upon every flat surface they can find. But there’s also the hum of traffic, the cacophony of radiofeed and stereos competing with each other, a million phone conversations swarming together like a wasp nest. There are paving stones beneath his feet. A box in his arms, full of pieces of himself.

“Are you just going to stand there?” a voice says.

He looks up, and the voice is George. Of course it is.

George is standing on the steps, his hip leaning against the railing and an identical box to the one Dream’s holding secured in his grasp. It has marker pen scrawled over the side. His eyes are older than they used to be. Instead of the purple, his hair is natural all over in an attempt at professionalism, and although Dream would never admit it, he thinks he might prefer how soft it is between his fingers. George’s feet cross over on the third step, and Dream knows he’s going to remember that particular step for months and months to come. He’s going to remember the rest of them too, once he knows them as well as the steps in the middle of his parent’s house. Perhaps he won’t take a washing basket to them this time.

“I’m just thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

About how far they’ve come, mostly. About his paychecks and George’s combined, about filling in forms by candlelight, about coming to a place where the sea lies waiting for them. But without the small-townness of it all. If they were to drive another hour along the coast, they’d reach the real sea. Wild, untameable. Maybe they’ll do it every Saturday.

“I’m just happy,” he says after a moment, shifting the box because it’s beginning to slip out of his grip. “That’s not a crime, is it?”

“Can you be happy inside?” George is standing by the door now, squinting at the buzzers for a moment. “The rest of our shit is gonna get here soon.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

He watches George unlock the main door, shoving it open to reveal grey flooring stretching off into the depths of the house. It’s divided into three, so the hallways appear impersonal and liminal. Despite all of it, Dream’s chest fills with buoyancy, like he’s floating in the middle of the sea with a life jacket to shove him to the surface every time he attempts to force his head under.

“I’m locking you out if you don’t move your ass,” George says, but they both know he’s not being serious.

“*Fine.*”

Dream breathes salty air. When his lungs are full of it, he steps forward, and climbs the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

edit: look at [this art](#) and [this art](#) once again so so humbled that these were created because of my silly little words <33

i ran a twitter poll about the fucking skirt and 50 or so people said NO to skirt george so after a lot of deliberation i decided to do it anyway (except i didnt because angel actually decided for me). i hope at least some of u cheered.

oh wait the fic's over i should probably say like thank u for coming. thank u for coming! over the course of this fic i have had countless people tell me they fucking hate a/b/o but this one is the exception for whatever reason—i hope i didnt ruin it with the heat sex LOL i know that was kinda pushing it a lot. also i cant even blame u for hating a/b/o. i was peer pressured into this (thank u i enjoyed writing it)

when i first checked a few months ago can u believe there were NO FUCKING OMEGA/OMEGA DNF FICS and idk if there are any more now but i hope more people write them because it's a good fucking agenda. sorry. someone please write more i will read it and kiss u (also send them to me grrr is this threatening enough) send me alpha/alpha fics too tbh these are my favourite a/b/o dynamics

- Saint <3

End Notes

kudos and comments so so appreciated! thank you to everyone who leaves them <3

[twitter](#) | [fic playlist](#) | [tumblr](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!